The New Criterion

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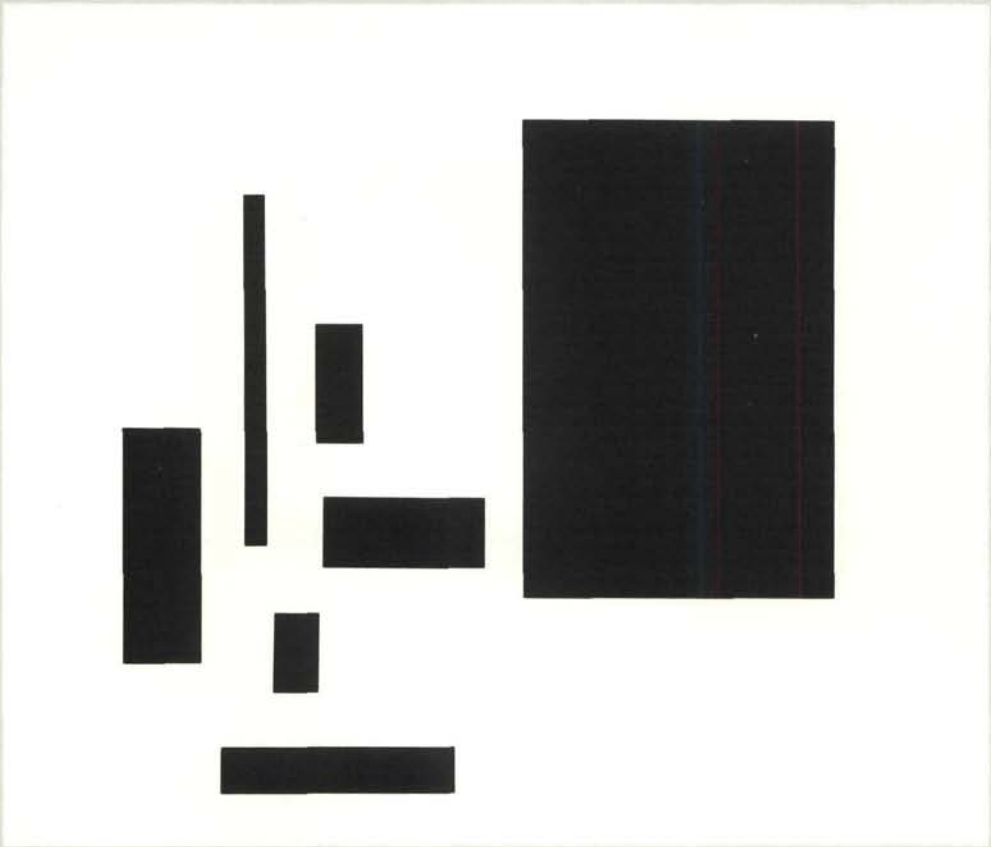

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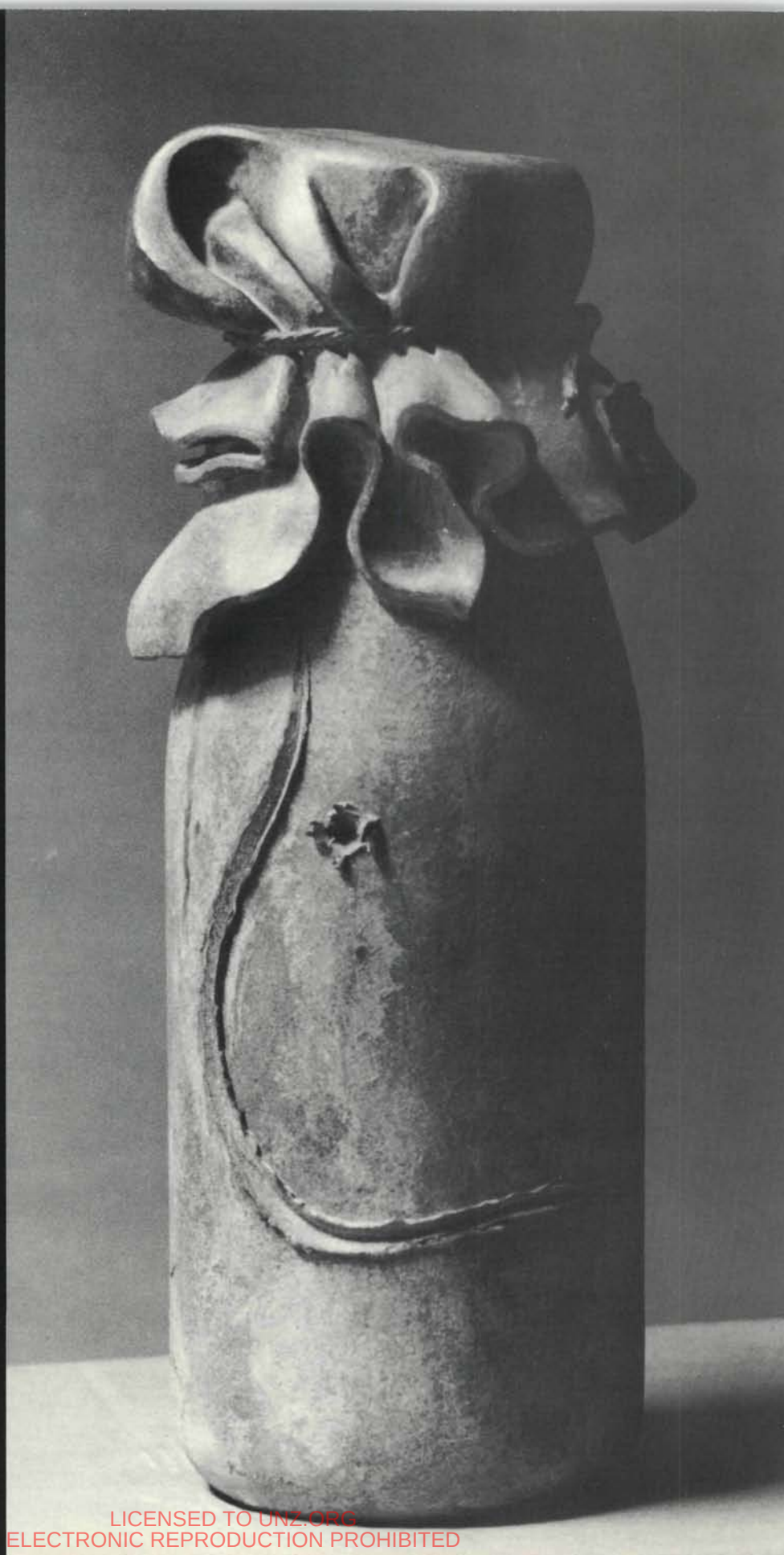

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The death of Andy Warhol

by Hilton Kramer

The death of Andy Warhol was bound to be a media event, and so it was. For the media, after all, it was like a death in the family. Here was a figure who was famous for being famous, for knowing the famous, and for serving as an avatar of fame, and nothing so pleases the media as an opportunity to celebrate one of their own creations. The front-page obituary in *The New York Times,* the special segment on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, the cover story in *New York* magazine, not to mention the many pictures and news stories in the daily tabloids and on the network news programs—the coverage could hardly have been better (or worse) if Warhol himself had orchestrated it. Which, in a sense, he had. The most distinguishing characteristic of this prodigious outpouring of commentary, homage, and celebrity-worship was the way it confined itself to the terms which Warhol himself had set for the discussion of his life and work. Even writers who, on other occasions, find it appropriate to apply more elevated standards to art (and life) proved ready and eager to suspend them in discussing Warhol and his significance. It was as if no language but Warhol's own—the language of hype—could be expected to have any meaning when it came to explaining just what it was that made him important.

All the same, it is my impression that Warhol's death caused some of these volunteer laureates of hype and celebrity a good deal of uneasiness. Suddenly they were on the spot. They couldn't in good conscience bring themselves to say that Warhol had been a great artist even though they had often written about him as if he were. They couldn't, in many cases, even bring themselves to explain why he should be considered an important artist even though they had long taken it for granted that he was. No one is under oath, of course, in writing obituary notices. Even so, there was a general tendency on this occasion to take refuge in the subject's fame, in his personality, in his business affairs and his entourage, even his wig, and leave the art more or less unexamined. Amid the expected encomiums, there was in fact a discernible hedge and wariness to be observed in the claims advanced for Warhol's artistic achievement. It turned out that almost no one could bring any conviction to the task of specifying what that achievement had consisted of.

The truth is, even among his friends and admirers it was widely recognized—even if seldom admitted—that, although being an artist was essential to his social position, Warhol was far more important as a social phenomenon that he ever was or could be *as* an artist. That was what gave him his special aura, after all—and his influence. *As* an artist he ended his career exactly as he began it—as a gifted *commercial* artist with a flair for the arresting graphic image and skillful layout. He was never much of a painter, and as a sculptor he didn't exist. (As for his movies, it is probably enough to observe that, having served their purpose—which

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was to propagate the Warhol myth—they had long ago predeceased their creator. Of aesthetic merit they had none whatever.) Warhol's "genius" (if it can be called that) consisted of his shrewdness in parlaying this essentially commercial talent into a career in an art world that no longer had the moral stamina to resist it: a career that would have been unthinkable, for example, ten years earlier.

To an extent that was unrivaled among his contemporaries in the Pop Art movement, if only because they knew so much less than he did about the dynamics of the fashion world, Warhol understood that something momentous had happened to the art scene in the late Fifties—that the relation which had formerly obtained between art and fashion (and hence between art and publicity, and between art and money) had undergone a decisive change. Which is to say that he understood the success of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns better than they did. (Not that they were slow to catch on—but that is another story.) Their success owed much to the international acclaim which Abstract Expressionism, having passed through its avant-garde phase, was receiving for the first time, and to their putative role as both the heirs and the rebels of that movement. Warhol understood that something else was involved; that with the success of Rauschenberg and Johns, the age of the avant-garde had drawn to a close. Their success had been, initially, an art world success, but it quickly developed into a much larger phenomenon. A boundary separating art and fashion had been breached, and never again would the really big successes of the art world be confined to that world. Henceforth success in that art world would be played on a much larger stage.

Rauschenberg and Johns came out of the school of Marcel Duchamp. They stood in relation to Abstract Expressionism very much as Duchamp had stood to Cubism—as plenipotentiaries to the world of publicity and chic, agents of "advanced" styles that offered just the right dash of scandal (the stuffed goat, the paint-splattered bed, the targets and flags, etc.) to excite a taste that had wearied of the rigors of abstract art. Warhol, on the other hand, belonged to the school of Condé Nast, where such "scandals" are recognized as marketable commodities and routinely processed as the materials of fashion. In moving from a career in fashion illustration to a career in this swiftly expanding art world, Warhol saw that the product needed only the most superficial modification to win attention and garner rewards—rewards far greater than any to be found in the realm of fashion illustration. Art, no matter how debased, still offered a kind of status that was denied to advertising, but otherwise there were now fewer and fewer differences separating the art world from the advertising world. The ethos was getting to be essentially the same. Success was the goal, the media would provide the means of achieving it, and what the media loved more than anything else—certainly more than art—was a product based on their own stock-in-trade. And that, from his "Marilyns" to his "Maos," is what Warhol mainly specialized in giving them. Considering the magnitude of his accomplishment in this respect, it would be churlish to deny that he did indeed have genius of a sort. No ordinary talent could have done it—but the talent, alas, was not primarily an artistic talent.

As everyone knows, the art world never really recovered from this fateful incursion. As a movement Pop Art came and went in a flash, but it was the kind of flash that left everything changed. The art public was now a different public—larger, to be sure, but less serious, less introspective, less willing or able to distinguish between achievement and its trashy simulacrum. Moreover, everything connected with the life of art—everything, anyway, that might have been expected to offer some resistance to this wholesale vulgarization and demoralization—was now cheapened and corrupted. The museums began their rapid descent into show biz and the retail trade. Their exhibitions were now mounted like Broadway shows, complete

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with set designers and lighting consultants, and their directors pressed into service as hucksters, promoting their wares in radio and television spots and selling their facilities for cocktail parties and other entertainments, while their so-called "education" programs likewise degenerated into sundry forms of entertainment and promotion. The critics were co-opted, the art magazines commercialized, and the academy, which had once taken a certain pride in remaining aloof from the blandishments of the cultural marketplace, now proved eager to join the crowd—for there was no longer any standard in the name of which a sellout could be rejected. When the boundary separating art and fashion was breached, so was the dividing line between high art and popular culture, and upon all those institutions and professions which had been painstakingly created to preserve high art from the corruptions of popular culture the effect was devastating. Some surrendered their standards with greater alacrity than others, but the drift was unmistakable and all in the same direction—and the momentum has only accelerated with the passage of time.

There was no more telling symbol of this surrender of standards than Warhol himself, the cheerful nihilist who became the unlikely culture-hero of a new era. Anyone who was around at the time will remember exactly when it was that we were given our first taste of its lethal character. It came, of course, in the early Sixties with the false dawn and specious glamour of the Kennedy administration—the media-fabricated glamour that in retrospect has turned out to be the perfect political analogue for what was occurring on the cultural scene. There is an important book to be written about the cultural fallout of the Kennedy years, and Warhol's would by no means be the only significant career that would require a place in the story. So, among many others, would Norman Mailer's and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s and George Plimpton's, and so too, in their own spheres, would the history of *New York, The New Yorker,* and *The New York Review of Books,* not to mention less exalted branches of the media. Still, in any such study a special place would have to be reserved for the Warhol phenomenon, which gave to the art world—but not to the art world alone—a model that has proved to be so irresistible that it is now a permanent, and permanently disabling, component of cultural life. It was really that ghastly model, rather than the man or his art, that the media celebrated so copiously in their obituary notices of Andy Warhol—a model that continues to exhibit a potency his art could never achieve.

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The confinement of free verse

by Brad Leithauser

I hope to vanish, with a modest flourish, from this essay in a moment. Since my interest here lies in universal literary questions, I suspect that any appearance of the first-person singular may well be obtrusive or misleading. And yet, given my thesis (that free verse at the moment shows signs of exhaustion), and my own relationship to it (as the recent author of a book whose poems all employ some variety of systematic rhyme, I would like to be thought of as a formalist), perhaps I might usefully offer a few simultaneously self-exculpating and self-expunging words.

To speak of exhaustion in any art form is a notoriously perilous undertaking. So I proceed gingerly, apologetic in advance, and well aware that any such impression of fatigue may spring from all sorts of dubious emotions extrinsic to the art itself—peevishness, prickliness, intolerance, inflexibility. In some cases, what looks like fatigue may simply be a reflection of inner depletion; in others, it may serve as one of those helpful illusions by which a writer reduces the world's helter-skelter to a manageable size and form. But in any case, and whatever the motivations behind them, notions of artistic exhaustion often prove misguided.

For the fact is that poetic genres over the years prove exceptionally hardy. One recalls that T. S. Eliot at the outset of his career expressed doubts as to whether the sonnet was still practicable. In "Reflections on 'Vers Libre,'" an essay that sought to explain and justify the new free-verse movement, he hypothesized that the heroic couplet, although dormant, had "lost none of its edge since Dryden and Pope laid it down"; it merely awaited the awakening touch of the true satirist, than whom "no man of genius is rarer." But "as for the sonnet," he added, "I am not so sure." These judgments were offered in 1917, at a time when Frost, surely one of the great sonneteers in the language, was just coming into his own. Whether Eliot was right about the heroic couplet remains uncertain, since the new Pope has not yet arrived, but about the sonnet he was spectacularly wrong. How heartening it is to contemplate the bounty and range of magnificent sonnets composed in the decades since Eliot's pronouncement. Frost's triumphs were succeeded by those of John Crowe Ransom, W. H. Auden, Louise Bogan, Patrick Kavanagh, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, Malcolm Lowry, Philip Larkin, and Seamus Heaney. Obviously, one must be wary in calling any form exhausted.

Yet literary forms do on occasion grow tired—as Eliot's own career, with its brave abandonment of much that had become enfeebled and formulaic, so inspiringly demonstrates. Although much good poetry was produced by Eliot's conservative contemporaries, especially within that motley gathering known as the Georgians, their work does in retrospect look rather staid—as though it needs a real roughing up. Eliot came at a good time.

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But poetic forms may do more than grow tired: they may actually perish. English alliterative verse of the sort that flourished from *Beowulf* down into Chaucer's era at some point apparently crossed that bourne from which none return. Even Auden, who worked successfully in more poetic forms than any other English-language poet, could not quite, in his monumental *Age of Anxiety,* pull off its resuscitation. And one cannot rule out the possibility that various literary forms alive today will eventually become extinct. (One notes in passing that the masque, despite Frost's heroic efforts, doesn't seem these days to enjoy the flush of health . . .) And while I don't mean to suggest that free verse is dead, or will ever die, it does seem to me (to work my exit behind a pun) that free verse, its energies having peaked some time ago, is now looking rather peakèd.

Formal or free, every poem offers the reader in its first few lines what might be called a prosodic contract. These lines necessarily serve a multiplicity of functions—they are simultaneously lure, inquiry, and pledge. They ask, in effect, *Do you like what you've seen so far?,* and pledge, in effect, *Well, there's more to come* . . . . The true poet takes this pledge with utmost gravity, since he is asking for what is (from the poet's point of view) the most precious commodity in the world: a moment of the reader's attention. In the public imagination, poetry is viewed without fail as a solitary enterprise—which it is, of course, in its composition and its eventual consumption. But this stereotype obscures an inescapable element of salesmanship (one not even escaped by the poet whose work is published posthumously). Whether he writes in a cabin in the tundra or in the telephone-jangled offices of a New York City literary magazine, the poet at some point becomes a hawker at an increasingly crowded fair—that which is represented by the poetry anthology—and must seek with every cunning to make his own wares look irresistible. The prosodic contract serves as one of his prime enticements.

How the poet chooses to meet the terms of his prosodic contracts will in many ways define his artistry. He may decide to keep to their terms punctiliously. On the grandest prosodic scale, this is what Milton accomplishes in *Paradise Lost.* The epic's first few lines advise the reader that what will follow is not only an evocation of man's fall from grace but also a colossal procession of immensely vigorous, freely enjambed and yet stringently decasyllabic blank verse—and this is, from the prosodic standpoint, precisely what Milton delivers, with no let-up or letdown, for some ten thousand lines. In the humbler arena of the lyric, Frost was a great one for upholding his prosodic contracts. He delighted in a little game in which he would pose contractual terms of such strictness that they looked destined to be broken —and then would carry the thing off to the letter. The opening of "Provide, Provide" offers a choice instance:

> The witch that came (the withered hag)
> To wash the steps with pail and rag
> Was once the beauty Abishag,
>
> the picture pride of Hollywood.
> Too many fall from great and good
> For you to doubt the likelihood.

The terms of the prosodic contract could not be clearer. Frost is pledging to supply exactly rhymed iambic tetrameter triplets. The reader may reasonably conjecture that the rhyme, pressured by thematic necessity or the mere threat of musical monotony, will eventually take refuge in off-rhyme, or that the meter may have to relax itself. But the rhymes remain exact throughout the poem's seven stanzas, and the meter, though here and there relying on the common substitution of a trochee for an iamb, stays strictly octosyllabic and absolutely taut.

Some of the best poets believe that prosodic contracts were made, like records, to be broken. Auden's "The Lesson," for example, lies on the page like a short, modified sonnet sequence (one in which octave and sestet have been transposed), and in

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many ways it feels like one, too. And yet each of these "octaves" proves short by one line; they produce, uncomfortably, thirteen-line sonnets. The resultant disequilibrium enhances the tale the poem tells of confused wanderings and squelched expectations.

Or the poet may seek to snare the reader by offering a contract whose terms are mysterious. What in the world, the reader must ask, is Robert Graves pledging when he constructs an initial stanza like this one?

> You, love, and I,
> (He whispers) you and I,
> And if no more than only you and I
> What care you or I?

Will all lines within each quatrain rhyme with each other? Or is Graves going one step further and actually warranting that each stanza will have but one end-word? The reader, challenged, bemused, is pulled magnetically into the second stanza:

> Counting the beats,
> Counting the slow heart beats,
> The bleeding to death of time in slow
> heart beats,
> Wakeful they lie.

Only now can the reader safely say what the covenant is: the first three lines of each stanza will conclude with the same word; the fourth (serving as refrain) will offer a rhyme on *i*.

Whether the formal poet chooses to uphold the prosodic contract, or to break it, or initially to conceal its terms, his or her poem addresses the reader on two levels. The underlying reassurances and occasional trickeries that the poem's prosody engineers are related to, but ultimately detachable from, the poem's content. Prosody is a game played with the reader's legitimate expectations, and the more firmly these are established, the more fruitfully can the game's designer meet or upset them. And free verse, if it would engage the reader as entirely as the best formal poetry does, must supply an analogous series of satisfactions and frustrations—since prosody is a game of such liberal rewards that few poems can afford to disregard it altogether. One must ask, then, what is the prosodic contract that free verse makes?

The answer, which not surprisingly is complex, depends partly upon when the poem is being read. In an earlier age, perhaps, an appearance of formlessness on the page might in itself have delivered a small shock and an intimation of freshness. But that time has long since departed. Formlessness has become the norm in our country; notwithstanding Eliot's warning that "there is no freedom in art," the "free-est" of free verse has been adopted as our orthodoxy. Admittedly, to be the orthodoxy is not necessarily a bad thing (despite what certain reflexive, and hence at bottom conservative, rebels might cry to the contrary). It's a role that offers plenty of compensations, among them a heartening sense of community. And one need only consider the Georgians to see that an era's orthodox poetry may be durably lithe and lively. But the orthodoxy, by definition, relinquishes most of its ability to shock. Today, those free-verse poets whose prosodic contracts announce *I Pledge the bracing surprise of inconsistency* are presenting no surprise at all. To entrance the modern reader, a free-verse contract must be more novel than that.

If one selects a poem at random from a contemporary "little magazine," the result will likely be something in free verse that makes no prosodic pledge beyond this promise of irregularity. The opening lines will engender no feeling of accumulation, no sense of gathering melody. Naturally, the typical poem of any age will be at best a mediocre affair: excellence is always the rarity. But the prevalent species of badness may prove instructive as to why the good poets of the age wrote as they did and why, when they failed, they failed as they did. Taken in moderation, and in the right spirit, the reading of typical bad poems may repay study.

One sort of typical bad poem of our time is, thematically, a distinctive blend of person-

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al jadedness and self-congratulation. Structurally, its lines usually vary from six to nine syllables; its diction is flat; and its vocabulary is drastically narrowed—often more so than that to which a writer of children's verse would restrain himself. The poem may occasionally slip into rhyme (that hoary convention has an interesting way of surfacing when the free-verse poem strives after a powerful conclusion), and line breaks—enjambments—tend to be extremely dynamic.

Enjambment plays a central, even a defining, role in contemporary American free verse. Its prominence is that of the sole survivor; with so many prosodic devices having been cast aside, enjambment remains as one of the few "tricks" to be pulled from the crumpled black silk hat of the free-verse writer. The harmonies of rhyme, along with all the vitalizing dissonances of off-rhyme, have been largely silenced. So, too, the heartbeat of meter, and the tugging counterpoint that speech rhythms create against it. And so, too, the caesura, most of whose verve arises from the contrast between its own darting mobility and the stable grid of a metrical substructure. The final result, when coupled with a lack of interest in new, compensatory prosodic devices, is a poetry that seeks to build most of its energy by breaking its lines at whatever points appear most confusing or disruptive. One sees again and again an attempt, in Richard Wilbur's words, to "throw a monkey/wrench into the poem." The effect sometimes *is* a kind of energy, but of a transitory and often unpleasantly bumptious sort. This is freneticism masquerading as power—a sort of jittery, caffeine high. And given the narrowness of its source, one is not surprised when its stamina collapses and all energy drains from the poem on a second or third reading.

This perception of prosodic bankruptcy clarifies some aspects of that puzzling phenomenon known as "confessional verse"—an unfortunate term, and one usually resisted by those to whom it would be applied (Berryman reacted to it "with rage and contempt"). If used to encompass Berryman's work, or those autobiographical free-verse poems Lowell assembled in *Life Studies,* it is a term tinged with honor. Nonetheless, and whatever its glorious roots, confessional verse has come to designate a body of work whose subject matter is as intimate, and often as grisly, as possible, and whose style appears an attempt to render style irrelevant. This sort of verse regards the employment of any "artifice" (rhyme, meter, elevated diction, and so forth) as evidence of insincerity, and from the prosodic point of view it tries to "heat up" the poem to a point where craft, or the lack of it, becomes extraneous. And to some extent it may succeed in doing so. The critic is apt to feel churlish, anyway, in pointing out that a poem which chronicles, say, the gruesome bullying the poet underwent in junior high school happens to be devoid of music, artistry, and intelligence. Although its makers would hardly regard it in these terms, confessional verse can often be viewed as a not always conscious attempt to overcome the besetting problem of contemporary free verse: the running impoverishment of a genre whose prosody is limited to enjambment.

Some of the difficulties the free-verse poet now confronts may be clarified by analogy to the writer of what is known as either syllabic or pure syllabic verse—poetry, that is, organized around the number of syllables occurring per line without regard to where or how often stresses fall. The two genres have much in common. Both free verse and syllabic verse are children of this century. Both were born in a spirit of revolution. Both attempt to escape the long-standing hegemony of accentual-syllabic verse, as epitomized by the dominance of the iamb. And both would oust the iamb through the establishment of a line that has no metrical feet. In addition, syllabic verse provides a useful analogue because it, unlike free verse, has the "advantage" of relative unpopularity; with so few poets writing or having a stake in it, syllabic verse offers an opportunity for disinterested inquiry.

The development of syllabic verse in English stems from the concurrent but indepen-

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dent explorations of two women, Elizabeth Daryush in England and Marianne Moore in America. Daryush was furthering the prosodic explorations of her father, Robert Bridges, the poet laureate. Marianne Moore's antecedents remain unclear. But in any case, each was writing syllabic verse by the late Twenties, although their work otherwise shows little similarity of tone or feel or subject matter. In Moore's hands, syllabic verse generated wildly variable line lengths, including, most strikingly, very short lines of five, three, two, and even one syllable. The potency of her effects often depended upon the foiled expectations of a reader accustomed to iambic units. Daryush no less than Moore played with iambic expectations, but more quietly. Her choice of line length was usually a five- or four-syllable line, although on occasion she wove a decasyllabic line that drifted charmingly in and out of iambic pentameter. Partial freedom from the iamb fostered in both poets an agreeable informality; Daryush chose, significantly, to capitalize the first word of each line in poems written in traditional metrics but to use lower case for syllabic verse. And (though sometimes more in theory than in practice) freedom from the piston-pulse of the iamb released a subtle and hitherto unheard music. A kind of prosodic egalitarianism was to be instituted, through which the unaccented syllable, traditionally subordinate, would become an equal partner with the grandee that bore a heavy stress: each would contribute evenly toward the new music of the syllable-cluster.

Yet as its relative unpopularity testifies, syllabic verse in English offers a bare-bones prosody. Its primary, and irresolvable, problem remains the flimsy building block with which it would erect its monuments. The syllable in spoken English leads a somewhat precarious existence; if unstressed, it tends to be "swallowed up" by any proximate stress, thereby rendering very troublesome any determination of the number of syllables a word actually possesses. Does "different," say, have two syllables or three? In actual speech, as opposed to the clean divisions a dictionary might impose, how many syllables do "comfortable" and "temperature" and "reference" have? When such words appear in metrical verse, the reader has the firm clue of the prosodic foot as a guide to the writer's intention. In traditional iambics, for example, "heaven" may be monosyllabic in one line and disyllabic a few lines later; the meter instructs us even where a mark of elision ("heav'n") has been omitted.

Those languages that have nurtured a long-standing prosody based upon syllabics tend to have sharply demarcated syllables differentiated by relatively light stress. In Japanese poetry, for example, one is never in doubt as to how many syllables a word should be accorded. But when, as in English, the syllable count is disputable, the reader finds it impossible to sense viscerally whether or not a line conforms to its norm; and without the active participation of the viscera, no prosody can flourish. Marianne Moore often worked with an extremely expansive syllabic line—sometimes as long as seventeen syllables—but there is simply no way in which the reader can know (without benefit of counting) whether a line not subdivided into metrical feet actually contains seventeen syllables or veers slightly above or below that figure. Not surprisingly, syllabic verse often inclines toward the short line and the minified subject matter and treatment which a short line encourages. No sane soul will ever write an epic in syllabic verse.

Syllabic verse in English has been around long enough—more than half a century—for us to speak with some assurance about its intrinsic shortcomings. There can now be little question that, notwithstanding its considerable charms, it lacks a generous enough prosody to evolve and to go on evolving, as accentual-syllabic verse has done for more than half a millennium. One suspects, in fact, that it will never fully extricate itself from the iambic line; today, no less than at its inception, syllabic verse scores many of its points by "playing off" traditional metrics. If evaluated as an alternative to accentual-syllabic prosody, syllabic verse must be deemed a failure—but one in many ways

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analogous to that glorious Elizabethan failure which sought to liberate English verse by means of a quantitative system. Those attempts (which, incidentally, as Derek Attridge shows in his *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres,* published in 1975, were based on somewhat faulty conceptions of classical versification) sought to create in English a consciously musical prosody based upon syllabic duration. Sidney, Spenser, Campion, and a host of lesser writers had a go at it before this cul-de-sac was given up. But if it had spawned no other poem than Campion's "Laura," one would have to look kindly upon this misguided endeavor. Similarly, when one contemplates the "failure" of syllabic verse, one must note that the lyric in our century would be a much diminished thing without felicities like Moore's "Bird-Witted," Daryush's "Still-Life," Sylvia Plath's "Man in Black," Ted Walker's "By the Saltings," and Auden's "Lullaby."

If syllabic poets suffer from the innate limitations of their prosody, writers of free verse face still more formidable trials, since they must contend with prosodic tools which by comparison are in many ways even more attenuated. A good argument might be made (perhaps expanding upon Daryush's brief explanatory preface to her collected poems) that syllabic verse enjoys the primary advantages of free verse—ease, informality, flexibility, and, perhaps most important, a flowing naturalness—while also commanding the significant further asset of its own distinctively patterned music. Clearly, free-verse poets labor under an extreme handicap. Clearly, as well, to labor under a handicap can be a salutary experience; the poem may be better for the difficulties thrust upon it. (The writer who embarks on a Petrarchan sonnet in English labors, too, under a sizable disadvantage—the necessity of meeting a demanding rhyme scheme in a language that can be niggardly with its rhymes; much of our literature's best poetry is severely "handicapped" in some way.) Given the inherent difficulties of free verse, one is not surprised that Eliot wrote, in "Reflections on 'Vers Libre'":

> The rejection of rhyme is not a leap at facility; on the contrary, it imposes a much severer strain upon the language. When the comforting echo of rhyme is removed, success or failure in the choice of words, in the sentence structure, in the order, is at once more apparent.

Theodore Roethke echoed this sentiment in a short personal critique entitled "Some Remarks on Rhythm":

> We must realize, I think, that the writer in freer forms must have an even greater fidelity to his subject matter than the poet who has the support of form. He must keep his eye on the subject, and his rhythm must move as a wind moves, must be imaginatively right, or he is lost.

Poets and critics customarily greet such remarks with a sort of approving skepticism, regarding them as understandable overstatements meant to illustrate that this business of free verse is not so easy as it looks. But the longer one lives beside free verse, and surveys the field of its achievement, the more evident it becomes that such pronouncements deserve to be taken uncondescendingly—that is, at face value. Eliot was not only generally correct, but particularly, literally so: it is harder to write truly excellent free verse than excellent metric verse.

Once this truth is accepted, the extraordinarily anomalous condition of contemporary American poetry reveals itself. Nearly all of the verse now being composed in our country undertakes a severely taxing genre. From the evening workshop at the community adult-education center to the advanced writing seminar at the Ivy League university, most everyone has chosen to scale Parnassus from its most slippery and treacherous face.

Among poets, critical analysis of the relationship between free verse and prosody has been scanty. This lack stems partly from the

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recognized problem of applying prosodic analysis, with its troublesome blend of ambiguity and nicety, to the dispersive, category-eluding entity that is free verse. Any orderly attempt to bring the discipline of prosody to a literary genre often perceived as disdainful of all order and discipline may seem faintly perverse—although neither William Carlos Williams nor Charles Olson, two of the spiritual fathers of free verse, shied from the task. In their different (but unfortunately equally hazy) ways, each sought to unearth the solid theoretical underpinnings of free verse. Williams's scattered observations on the "variable foot" and Olson's on "projective verse" both acknowledge a need for some coherent exposition of their chosen genre.

This is a need which has been little served or even recognized by the academic community, as Charles Hartman points out in his excellent book, *Free Verse: An Essay in Prosody* (1980). Hartman begins with an investigation into the origins of free verse, managing in the process to disinter a good many fresh quotations, and moves from there to a look at why free verse behaves as it does. If his tone at times is overly defensive (free verse surely requires no apologia at this point), one excuses this as a ground-layer's impulse to take little for granted. And if his role as defender curbs Hartman's willingness to discuss the problems free verse now confronts, the reader nonetheless comes away from the book feeling that a difficult subject has belatedly been readied for discussion.

The problem of free verse in 1917, when Eliot wrote, and even more pressingly in 1987, is the necessity of discovering sufficient rewards to compensate for those lost with the abandonment of traditional prosodic devices. And in 1987 it grows evident that if free verse is ever to go forward and forge a body of work comparable to that cultivated under the iamb, it will require fresh tools. It must "make new" what was made new before.

Attempts to broaden the range of prosodic tools in contemporary verse have come from various directions and have brought a variety of successes and failures. Three cases seem noteworthy. Ted Hughes has sought to restore to verse some of the harsh, "primitive" rhythms of chant and imprecation. Others have attempted this before (one thinks of Vachel Lindsay and his "Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you./Beware, beware, walk with care./Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay boom"), but rarely with Hughes's power, as displayed in the opening of *Crow*:

> Black was the without eye
> Black the within tongue
> Black was the heart
> Black was the liver, black the lungs
> Unable to suck in light
> Black the blood in its loud tunnel
> Black the bowels packed in furnace

James Merrill, expanding on the work of Wilfred Owen and W. H. Auden, has imported into American verse an unusual sort of rhyme in which (as in "live" and "love," or "sun" and "soon") consonants remain fixed while internal vowels are altered. This is sometimes referred to as consonantal rhyme, although Edmund Blunden's coinage, "para-rhyme," seems vastly preferable. When used as extensively as Merrill somehow manages, the effect can be new sorts of harmonies:

> Gliding to a halt, the prodigal stirs.
> Pays the driver. Gives himself up to home.
> His mother, a year younger, kisses him.
> Maids are wafting suitcases upstairs . . . .

Or, later in the same poem:

> Another underground
>
> Chamber made ready. If this one was not
> Quite the profoundest or the most ornate,
>
> Give it time. The bric-a-brac
> Slumbered in bonds that of themselves would break
>
> One fine day, at any chance unsealing . . . .
> ("The Will")

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And James Dickey struggled for some years to write a verse whose basic foot was not the iamb but the anapest, whose basic inversion was not the trochee but the dactyl.

Dickey's exertions were interesting for a number of reasons. Although they found an obvious kin in Longfellow, who inclined toward rustic subjects and a systematic alternative to the iambic foot (Longfellow favored the falling meter of the trochee: "Forth upon the Gitche Gumee,/On the shining Big-Sea-Water . . ."), they had links to Swinburne as well, who likewise sought to expand our poetry not by destroying but by supplanting its reigning metrical foot (Swinburne experimented with modified classical feet). Dickey's eventual abandonment of the anapestic line, and his failure to enlist other poets in its cause, illustrates the peculiar staying power of the iamb. It was not about to depart merely because bidden to do so.

J. D. McClatchy, writing in *Poetry* magazine a few years ago, made a useful point about poetry's general stubbornness, its resistance to change:

> Poetry is the most conservative of the arts. When one thinks of the difference between Bach and Cage, or of the range of styles available to the visual artist, then poetry's resources seem limited indeed, and its very possibilities for change narrowed to them. A poem—any poem—written yesterday will seem closer to Homer and Sappho than the buildings in which those poems were conceived would resemble each other. Why? I don't know. Perhaps the nature of language itself, perhaps the channels of imagination, perhaps an abiding response to a few themes and stresses.

The durability of the iamb in English is but one manifestation of this conservatism. If one pauses to consider the revolutions the world has undergone in just the last few decades, to say nothing of the last few centuries, one comes away astonished to perceive that iambic pentameter—in the hands of a Richard Wilbur, anyway—thrives today in a form Chaucer would feel at home with.

Some further answers to that sharp *Why?* which McClatchy raises are sketched in a fascinating chapter called "The Neural Lyre" in Frederick Turner's recent book, *Natural Classicism.*[1] Turner not only has done an enormous amount of reading into the body's physiological responses to verse but also has helped carry out some technical research. His analyses extend those of I. A. Richards, whose writings seem now to have a before-their-time "hardness," a "high-tech" quality. Richards repeatedly stressed that poetry, for all its ethereality, must ultimately be understood as a force that operates upon the chemistry of the human body. What Turner has done is to advance this view by incorporating into his theories recent revelations about human physiology and the brain.

One of his most interesting discoveries concerns what he calls "the fundamental unit of metered poetry" and designates by the term LINE. He continues: "We distinguish it by capitalization from the normal use of the word, because some orthographic traditions do not conventionally write or print the LINE in a separate space as we do; and in other traditions there are examples of a long line divided into two sections by a caesura, which would, in terms of our classification, actually constitute a couplet of LINES. Metrically experienced poets can readily recognize the LINE divisions of poetry in languages they do not know, when it is read aloud." In a great many literatures, apparently, ranging from English and French to Japanese and Chinese to Ndembu (Zambia) and Eipo (New Guinea), the LINE tends toward a duration of between 2.5 and 3.5 seconds. A LINE in a tonal language like Chinese may have only eight syllables and the French Alexandrine twelve, but relative differences of syllabic velocity ensure that in recitation each requires between three and

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1 *Natural Classicism*, by Frederick Turner; Paragon House, 284 pages, $18.95.

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four seconds. It is impossible to sketch here the range of ideas and data which Turner advances in "The Neural Lyre"—without which, unfortunately, his theories are apt to sound rather shaky or thin. But his preliminary findings strongly suggest that something innate within the matrix of the human body—some complex concatenation of heartbeat, respiration, and, especially, synaptic firings within and between the two hemispheres of the brain—contrives to impose on any sort of poetry demands that run deeper than the language of their composition. It implies that there is nothing random or adventitious about the prosodic systems that evolve over time. Poets will gravitate toward those prosodies amenable to the demands that the body brings to the task of assimilating a line of verse; and these prosodies must change when changes in the language render them unfit to go on meeting those demands. Therefore, any attempt to "free" English verse from old patterns of line construction may run into constraints far less tractable than those of mere literary convention. Fundamental changes in prosody, such as those which occurred in English in the fourteenth century, may not be the product of artistic innovation so much as of adaptation: it may be the shifts of its language, and not the temperaments of its poets, which largely shape a culture's prosody.

The research Turner documents in *Natural Classicism* will no doubt be modified as refinements are made and further experimentation carried out. Regardless of how these may compel us to alter our perceptions, however, they can only confirm that no theory of poetry can afford to ignore the functioning, and the inbuilt limitations, of the body. And whatever new directions American poetry embarks upon in the next few decades, or for that matter in the next few centuries, these must supply, if they would prove artistically enduring, what Turner calls the "endorphin payload"—a term encompassing what the Greeks called "catharsis." When Emily Dickinson praised poetry that made her "feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off," she was calling for deeper endorphin payloads.

Given the demands and restrictions of the human body, it may well turn out that free verse is inherently barred from the very grandest heights of poetry. Great free-verse poems have been written in America and will likely continue to be written, since many of our best contemporary poets work chiefly with free forms. But it is almost inconceivable that any free-verse creation will ever be penned, or even word-processed, which could be placed beside *Paradise Lost* or *The Tempest*. (Admittedly, one need proceed on tiptoe when discussing what can and can't be done in literature. If Milton had never written *Paradise Lost*; had it been he who drowned in 1637 and not that distant friend Edward King whose death occasioned "Lycidas"; then university shelves would surely sway under the heft of treatises showing precisely why English and England proved inimical to the composition of an Epic . . . doing the impossible is just one of the things that literary genius delights in.) For page after page after page, *Paradise Lost* engages the full powers at the top of the reader's mind, where one's logic and learning are lodged, while serving up to a lower, less intellectual sector of the brain an endlessly entrancing music plucked from the five-stringed lyre of the iambic pentameter.

But perhaps this conventionally vertical depiction of the mind, with its division into top and bottom, is inappropriate. Turner's "Neural Lyre" suggests that the story which *Paradise Lost* unfolds would automatically, as a string of language, be processed by the left temporal lobe of the brain, while the music of its meter would be assimilated by the right. "If this hypothesis is accurate," he continues, "meter is, in part, a way of introducing right-brain processes into the left-brain activity of understanding language; and in another sense, it is a way of connecting our much more culture-bound (and perhaps evolutionarily later) linguistic capacities with the relatively more 'hard-wired' spatial pattern-recognition faculties we share

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with the higher mammals." The reading of *Paradise Lost,* then, or any other densely metrical poem, would be an ongoing act of neurological synthesis. And the centrality of this synthesis would also help explain poetry's curious conservatism. One understands the poet's reluctance to forego the oldest, and perhaps richest, means he has of "making himself whole."

The English language, and the bodies and brains of those who read and write it, may well be limited structurally so as to ensure that not only free verse, but every other poetic genre as well, will never match the breadth and vigor of the iambic line—particularly the pentameter. As developed and refined by Chaucer, Wyatt, Spenser, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, Milton, Pope, Keats, Tennyson, Yeats, and countless others—some great, some good, and some only occasionally good—the English iambic pentameter line represents one of the grandest collective accomplishments of humankind. It is one of those apical achievements—like the discovery of perspective in painting, or the development of the cathedral in architecture—that forever redefine their medium.

Where does this leave the contemporary American poet? Probably in a state of some disquiet. An impatience with the iamb is understandable and in many ways admirable—we should be hungry for new methods, and the freedom and brio and joy that the genuinely new brings with it. On the other hand, free verse is hardly new any more, and over the years it becomes (as Pound predicted it would by century's end) increasingly exhausted. What is needed, ideally, is some mode as multiplex as that iambic model which free verse has constantly sought to subvert and supplant—some mode whose potential might still be disclosing itself after a couple of hundred years. And time alone can reveal to us whether in fact this new mode has been waiting for us all along, folded and encoded simultaneously in our everyday language and in the storehouse of the brain. But as we wait for this uncertain revelation, we do ourselves no good—quite the contrary—by supposing that we possess what we don't possess, or that the problems afflicting free verse are secondary. Skepticism of free verse is, after all, not only a fully defensible attitude but a surprisingly long-lived and honorable one. It was only a couple of years after "vers libre" had made its forcible entrance into English poetry that Pound and Eliot began to fret that its original aims and energies had been waylaid. Recalling this moment in a 1932 issue of *The Criterion,* Pound wrote:

> That is to say, at a particular date in a particular room, two authors, neither engaged in picking the other's pocket, decided that the dilutation of *vers libre,* Amygism, Lee Masterism, general floppiness had gone too far and that some counter-current must be set going. Parallel situation centuries ago in China. Remedy prescribed in 'Emaux et Camées' (or the Bay State Hymn Book). Rhyme and regular strophes.
>
> Results: Poems in Mr. Eliot's *second* volume, not contained in his first 'Prufrock' Egoist, 1917), also 'H. S. Mauberley.'

This pilgrimage from the prosodically straitlaced to the unfettered and back again will doubtless go on until—if? when?—something better comes along.

John Berryman once remarked that "the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him." It's the sort of horrific notion one instinctively turns one's back on—even while noting, over one's shoulder as it were, how much of our greatest poetry sprang from overwhelming personal tragedy. But whether or not Berryman's dictum is valid, it suggests a corollary applicable to the poem rather than the poet: *A poem should undergo just as much prosodic suffering as does not actually kill it.* Most poems benefit from being made to "suffer" (through their toiling makers) the rigors of prosodic demands. These demands must in some cases be very light. There are poems whose charm resides in their looseness, their unlabored ease—and to force them into the carapace of an elaborate pat-

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tern of meter or rhyme or rhythm would likely prove fatal. (Although one must contrarily note that Cummings often managed effects of great spontaneity and nonconformity in poems that only with re-reading reveal themselves as sonnets; it is amazing how "free" the formal poem can be.) Those poems, however, whose subject matter or tone allows for prosodic intricacy, whether of a traditional or an innovative sort, should be made to bear it. A poem needs to proceed on as many levels as possible—intellectual, melodic, rhythmic—if it is to quarry from the mine of the body that "payload" which accompanies excellence.

Difficult though it may be to envision what a worthy replacement for the iambic pentameter line might actually look like, one can safely speculate that it would be at once strong and yet supple enough to embrace a range of expectations equivalent to those traditionally borne by metrical verse. In the introduction to one of his last books, *Dr. Brody's Report,* Jorge Luis Borges observed that "each thing implies the universe, whose most obvious trait is complexity." His own career, with its incessant mixings of the traditional and the innovative, provides convincing testimony of the powers of art to reflect that complexity, and an incentive to continue creative investigations into a zone that appears to grow more mysterious the farther we push. If free verse is to keep pace with our increasingly complex lives, and is to continue healthily serving us—through this century, into the next—it will need to gather to itself a broader collection of effects, a denser music.

EVA SZENT-MIKLOSY 1933-1987

We mourn the passing of our beloved friend and colleague, Eva Szent-Miklosy, who died after a long illness on April 4 at the age of fifty-three. Born in Dresden, Mrs. Szent-Miklosy received her B.S. degree in political science from Columbia in 1969. She was a member of the staff which founded *The New Criterion* in 1982 and played a major role in shaping the magazine's development. Her colleagues and the many writers with whom she worked will long cherish the memory of her high professional skills—all the more remarkable for being exercised in a language acquired as an adult in England and America—as well as for her enthusiasm, courage, and devotion to excellence. Our deepest sympathy goes to her husband, the distinguished historian and political scientist, Istvan Szent-Miklosy, and to her son, Istvan, Jr.

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Out of Eden: on Alberto Giacometti

by W. S. Di Piero

Sailing to New York in 1965 for the opening of the big retrospective show of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, Alberto Giacometti wrote a preface to the collection of drawings later published as *Giacometti: A Sketchbook of Interpretive Drawings.*[1] For many years he had made copies of images originated by others—a Rubens at the Borghese Gallery, a Pintoricchio at the Vatican, a Matisse or Egyptian sculptures in Paris, a Japanese print at his family home in Stampa. During his transatlantic voyage, in his mind's eye he suddenly saw them as an interfused but not undifferentiated community of forms: "How can one describe all that? The entire art of the past, of all periods, of all civilizations rises before my mind, becomes a simultaneous vision, as if time had become space." To his consciousness, any interval of time could be transformed into a concentrate of space: that continuous transformation was the purpose back of his daily work as an artist. Giacometti's painting and sculpture do not represent or dramatize time's passing and the changes it exacts. They translate the feeling of time—of present, past, and what his friend Sartre called the "project" of the future—into spatial relations, the most crucial being the changeful pressure of an empty immensity on the figures that inhabit it. The forms for which Giacometti is best known, the skinny bronzes which seem unconquerably alert to the unhoused distances on which they fix their gaze, are leached of anecdote. Though many of the figures are in some gesture of motion, or stand in an attitude out of which motion might ensue, they have been exiled from narrative time. This could be said about most figurative sculpture. But in Giacometti's things time is converted into the turbulence of matter laboring against the flaying, laving, purgatorial force of space. It is the torment of contingency. Giacometti wanted to cast or fix the action of the pressure ("as if time had become space") that he described in his little preface. But in the course of his life's work he achieved something else of profound importance for the life of forms in our lives. In the dizzying, cavernous oil portraits and the fibrous bronze stalks of men and women standing, walking, pointing, Giacometti made manifest the heroism of the encounter between the visible world and the testimonial eye, an encounter unavoidably inaccurate but driven by a fanatical self-revision and endlessly readjusted decisiveness. That was the empowering torment of his career, the products of which remain, in their startling resoluteness, magisterially unfinished.

As an undergraduate in the mid-1960s I used to frequent a small gallery in Philadelphia which once had on sale a small Giacometti pen-and-ink drawing of three figures. I remember it now as a skeletal revision of one of Cézanne's cardplayer groups.

1 *Giacometti: A Sketchbook of Interpretive Drawings,* text by Luigi Carluccio (Harry Abrams, 1967).

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(Giacometti in fact made copies of both versions of that painting.) It called attention to itself not only because a master was being candidly answered to by an obviously fervent admirer but because the answer was rendered in the feverish, idiosyncratic, exploratory style of a great successor. Like so much of Giacometti's work, even that unambitious sketch manifested the very process that brought it into being: the racing loops and slashes conjured figures that argued themselves into existence from the creamy void of the surround. As a "copy" it was a portrait of emergence. Probably dashed off like most of his drawings—he threw away bins full of those preserved from the hundreds more he drew, incessantly, on newspapers, napkins, magazines, tablecloths—it was as complete, as finished, as anything else he did. Which is to say that it was a completely realized failure to reproduce what his eye actually saw.

An artist's confident feel for his materials can induce a chastening sense of failure, because a feel for materials intensifies one's vision of the perfectibility of the work. Giacomo Leopardi, one of the most diligent students of the failure of aspiration, wrote in his daybooks in 1821: "The more you understand the materials of your work, the more you see them and feel them in your own hands, the easier it becomes to push beyond, farther and farther, and to perfect even that which seems already perfect." This is also a condition of self-nurturing despair: so long as everything is in process of the realization of perfection, perfection is impossible. For Giacometti, perfection was the accurate representation in plastic forms of his retinal vision of reality. His vision, he insisted time and again, was not penetrative, not a seeing into the essence of things. Nor was it illustrative of a view of the human condition. (On my visits to that Philadelphia gallery I sometimes carried with me William Barrett's *Irrational Man,* the cover of which bore a reproduction of one of Giacometti's tall walking figures and which had the unfortunate effect of ordaining him Existentialism's resident iconographer.) Giacometti's task was not expressionistic. He wanted merely to re-present the look of the object as he viewed it in its space. His vision of things, in his plain and direct terms, was his own kind of idealization.

The oldest description of this desire and frustration is probably Vasari's remark about Leonardo, who "through his comprehension of art, began many things and never finished one of them, since it seemed to him that the hand was not able to attain to the perfection of art in carrying out the things which he imagined." The persuasion of the unfinishable is not therefore an exclusively Romantic or modernist trait. It is the quality of a particular kind of artistic intelligence, one which treats all its products as projects; its intentions are always in process of redefinition or of merely provisional resolution. Giacometti's art is heroic because the struggle with impossibility is emergent and fully articulated in the actual work of his hands, undeflected by ironic elusiveness or righteous declamation. His way of looking at things was so intense that his conception of a possibly perfected representation of a dog or cat, a human head (the "dome," he called it), an arm, leg, nose, wheel, "base," or *place,* was impossible to realize. He was fated by the plasticity of his materials never to succeed at anything. "Everything fails," he said. The only difference is of degree. He complained, perhaps a little impishly, that if only he could find an artisan with the technical virtuosity to represent what his own eye actually saw, *then* he might be able to satisfy himself.[2]

The crisis of representation was complicated by his working methods. In a sense, his methods were the motor that drove the machinery of failure. More than earlier artists like Leonardo, Giacometti was caught up in the changeful life of his materials. The process of plastic emergence—the kneading,

2 Almost all the anecdotal material in this essay comes out of the two essential, abundant sources of information about Giacometti, both by James Lord: *A Giacometti Portrait* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965; reprinted 1980) and *Giacometti: A Biography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985).

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the paring, the hacking and gouging with knife and spatula—was an enactment of the stress of distance between his eye and its object of vision. Every figure he made in his later period acknowledges and measures that stress. Many kinds of representationalism follow, in their effects, the program of Browning's protorealist, Fra Lippo Lippi: "We're made so that we love / First when we see them painted, things we have passed / Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see; / And so they are better, painted—better to us." Art, under this prescription, restores to us the timeliness of visible reality, which is morally improved in its representations. It is art as visual and moral enhancement which stuns us momentarily out of the dulled wits of habit.

Though we know from his youthful drawings and paintings that Giacometti from the beginning possessed prodigious skills as a realist, he was not so concerned with imaginative enhancement as with the process by which new images are forged. If realists of Lippi's (and Browning's) persuasion are most concerned with resolution of image and moral effect, Giacometti is instead committed to impassioned, inconclusive deliberation. For him, the measure of the image-making process is the squeeze or exhalation of space around the figure, and the continued snags and ravelings of stress within the material itself. From roughly the mid-1940s till his death in 1966, his chief work was to make manifest the strain of pure becoming. Because his paintings and sculptures record for us the quickened movements of his imagination—interrogatory, abrasive, nurturing, corrective—we become second witness to the way the imagination may be lived in and through. When he travelled to Stampa to visit his family, and on the few occasions when he was hospitalized, Giacometti always took along in shoeboxes (or matchboxes) clay figurines wrapped in damp rags, which he would work on whenever possible. He was always working. And it was not a mere busyness or neurotic activity, for "work" was the constant formative exercise of skills on material that might eventually, miraculously, coin the perfect representation of what he ordinarily saw. I do not know of any other artist of our time who, crowded by the exempla of the enormous simultaneous past, so matter-of-factly conducted his art at the margins of what is possible.

The more than two hundred paintings, drawings, and sculptures recently on view at the Gianadda Foundation in Martigny, Switzerland, show the entire crisis-laden stream of Giacometti's career, from the crayon sketches done in his teens, through the tough uncertainties of the Surrealist period, to the wise and solemn busts of Elie Lotar in 1965.[3] The problem of the fated failure of his materials emerged in 1921, when he was trying unsuccessfully to finish a simple female bust. He later described his feeling of doomed ineffectuality as an expulsion from Paradise: "Before that, I believed I saw things very clearly, I had a sort of intimacy with the whole, with the universe. Then suddenly it became alien. You are yourself; and the universe is beyond, which is altogether incomprehensible." He felt himself cast out of the familiar community of representational forms. The loss of clear vision meant the loss of the primordial home where there was an immediacy of relation, almost a simultaneity, between the thing seen and its imitation in paint or clay. Once expelled, he had to bear the curse of work, and his major chore would be the recovery of that now lost oneness. By 1925, in his sculpture Giacometti was already in exile from the figural, though not in his painting, where he managed to sustain sculptural feeling in his way of working the paint. In a self-portrait of 1921, the artist's three-quarter profile twists back toward us over his shoulder, his gaze defiant, void of wishfulness. The quilted coloring, both here and in a larger, more frontal portrait of 1923, is

3 *Alberto Giacometti,* an exhibit at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda, in Martigny, Switzerland, ran from May 16 to November 2, 1986. The catalogue was edited by André Kuenzi.

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strongly suggestive of Cézanne's, but the action of the paint is muscular, the textures so dense that you feel the image has been modeled out of paint.

In his sculpture, however, Giacometti at that time was feeling more and more estranged from the human figure. Familiar definitions began to melt away. The features on the series of heads that he did of his father in 1927—in marble, granite, and bronze—are nearly re-absorbed into the blank of the material. All suggestion of skeletal and carnal expressiveness is being planed away. The figure retreats more and more furtively into the anonymity of stone slugs. It's astonishing that, feeling himself expelled from his Eden, Giacometti did not collapse into chaos or despair. Instead, he struck his own temporary bargain with vision by resorting to a thesis: sculptural representation is not emergence, it is *arrangement,* of concave and convex surfaces presented as idealized abstractions of natural forms. As a consequence, many of the pieces he produced in the late 1920s and early 1930s are spookily clean, polished, purged of all traces of the artist's exertions. They are a kind of willed (or trumped-up) deliverance.

The Gianadda show displays two versions of *Tête qui regarde* executed between 1927 and 1929. (The English title, *Head,* doesn't suggest the activity of looking which Giacometti intended; several of his early works are entitled simply *Tête.*) These are rectangular broadside slabs of glassy marble or bronze, druidic, anonymous, recondite. On the left side of the slab is an upright lozenge-shaped depression, on the right a concave ovoid. The effort behind these works is, I think, primarily to smother or conceal figural inflections. Their energy is all invested in a tremendous holding back of the will to externalize, to manifest. These are not negligible works, nor are they formal dead ends. Thirty years later, in the busts of Diego and Annette, that slab, ridged and roughened by the swarming return of human features, will turn to face us, like the jagged blade of a ruined axhead. Convinced as he was in the 1920s and 1930s of the failure of his vision ("Before that, I believed I saw things very clearly"), Giacometti coded into those near-blank forms, into the *Tête qui regarde,* the disappearance or unfindableness of the human gaze.

The concave impression became a more important, and less mystifying, physiological sign in Giacometti's female figures. In a hermetic, monumental bronze like *Woman* (plaster, 1927-1928; cast in bronze, 1970), the round scoop of the feminine occupies nearly half the sculpture's surface. It's an abstract work insofar as it is abstracted from, not representative of, the image in nature, and like much of his work from this period it is guarded and affectless—it might be a signpost, menhir, or club. The best known and most statuesque in this family of forms is the large bronze *Spoon Woman* of 1926. Her entire torso is a concavity, a cobra hood spread atop a narrow pedestal. The *Spoon Woman* has a strange talismanic effect. You sense sexual force momentarily in check, but with possibly tremendous engulfing power. Formally, it is assertive, exercising the traditional sculptural sovereignty of matter dominating and restructuring its surrounding space. But its stolid forms take the edge off sexual menace. The torso catches available light in its shallow bowl, but there is nothing reactive in that encounter.

The avoidance or difficulty of giving more immediate expression to sexual force led Giacometti finally to the operatic expression of sexual fear in *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932), probably the most notorious of his works and the one which, if the spectators at the Gianadda exhibit are any measure, draws more shocked, titillated attention than any other single work he produced. The sprung rib cage lies in shattered repose, but it is also a sex trap, the sharpened staves triggered to snap shut. The woman's legs, splayed wide as if hooked in delivery-room stirrups, push her pelvis up in a hideously ambiguous attitude of torment *and* availability. The impossibly long chain of neck vertebrae arc forcefully upward like the legs and the inverted

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ladle of her belly. It's as if the studiously determined concavities of Giacometti's spoon women had been angrily pulled inside out. The almost hysterically expressed sexual dread in this image might be less outrageous if it were not also so programmatic. The horrific sentiment is worked out in contrived, semi-abstract terms, the skeletal contortions, gruesomely pictorial, played off against the featureless abstraction of the upper torso and head. There's a vaguely spiteful glee in the tone—a woman murdered in what seems a moment of self-offering—which is the Surrealist's glee in overdetermined shock effects meant to outrage the norms of bourgeois pictorialism. *Woman with Her Throat Cut* is not a frivolous or wicked piece of work. Giacometti was temperamentally incapable of frivolity and uninterested in moral effects. But this and other things usually listed in the roster of his Surrealist works (*The Palace at 4 a.m., No More Play, Hand Caught by a Finger* [*Main prise*], *Disagreeable Object*) seem to me productions of an artist so stricken by his fall from the Eden of innocent representations that he elects a program of contrived images as a stay against inactivity and as a willed continuance while he tries to find his way back. In any event, Giacometti lacked the snickering bad-boy wit and antic buoyancy of the Surrealist intelligence. His troubles in the late 1920s and 1930s are evident in the impoverished plasticity of his materials. We do not see the clay and plaster toiling in the finished work. This is most conspicuous in the stacked, angular catwalks of *Reclining Woman who Dreams* (1929) and in the crossbarred penitentiary grid of *Man (Apollo)* (1929), the two most industrial and architectural of his works in bronze, where his subject is not being re-imagined in and through the material. Giacometti's exile from the Garden is truly an Adamic drama in that he lost faith in his ability to model nature in clay. His chore thereafter, and his curse, was to win back that enabling faith. And that in turn required a journey of self-restoration toward a new Eden where he would never, could never, arrive.

Giacometti once told James Lord that all during the Surrealist phase he knew he would sooner or later be obliged to go back to nature: "And that was terrifying, because at the same time I knew that it was impossible." There are signs of that return as early as 1932-1935, the years of the tall tubular *Nude* and *Invisible Object (Hands Holding the Void)*, with its owlish, contrite female visage. Although the spookiness of the Surrealist mood is still on him, and although he even experiments with Cubist volumes in *The Cube* and *Cubist Head* (both executed in 1934), Giacometti is being more attentive to the model. His return was contested at every point, however. The more he looked at the model, he said, "the more the screen between his reality and mine grew thicker. One starts by seeing the person who poses, but little by little all the possible sculptures of him intervene . . . . There were too many sculptures between my model and me." His relation to the natural figure was hopelessly complicated by all the mediating serial possibilities of representation. That kind of plenitude freezes progress. In the searing magnificence of his later work we can actually read or imagine, in the heft and texture of the final "abandoned" product, the intervening forms that mediated its progress. In light of the crisis he had to work through in the 1930s, it's remarkable that Giacometti did not seek shelter in self-glorifying parody or in the preciosities of an "art of exhaustion." Instead, he absorbed the very threat of dissolution, or dissipation, into his newly developing form-language as a kind of apotropaic act, to make his despair breathe deep within the formal life of the work. Around 1937 he tried to model a complete figure in plaster, a standing woman about eighteen inches tall. The figure grew smaller and smaller beneath the exertions of his knife until the needle of chalk crumbled. That was no self-canceling gesture. It was the as yet unredeemable consequence of an artist's desire to answer to his vision by interrogating his materials. It was form pulverized by the desire for form. In this respect, too, Giacometti is Cézanne's great successor, for both

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of them made the action of their materials—their *work*—supremely and devastatingly answerable to what their eye saw.

The emergence of the famous late style required a purging of vision. It required revelation. In 1942-1943 Giacometti produces the first *Woman with a Chariot.* (The "chariot" is a nurse's cart he had seen in a hospital.) The figure already suggests the new sculptural form he is working toward: the woman stands upright, legs closed, hands locked to her sides, with little definition of feature except for the rather innocently exposed bulge of sex. In 1945 he produces two figurines (not in the Gianadda show), each mounted on an oversized square pedestal; both are about four inches high, including base. The figures are mere slivers, fantastically reduced versions of the human offered up like sacrificial victims on altars, or chopping blocks. In 1946 came the revelation. Watching a newsreel in a moviehouse, Giacometti suddenly realized that the screen image was just a montage of dots on a flat surface, whereas the reality around him, which till that moment he had always viewed photographically, as if the world were a composite of colored figures and swatches of light on flat surfaces, was something altogether different. He experienced what he called "a complete transformation of reality, marvelous, totally strange." Space thickened around bodies, pinching and abrading them. The body's topography roughened into sinewy, craterous exposures. The head seemed at once islanded and enraptured by its aura of emptiness—the stricken skyward cry of *Head of a Man on a Rod* (1947) is one answer to that aura.

Giacometti's new vision, to which he brought the intensity of gaze that he had been sharpening since childhood, was of a preternatural embodiment of the human form in nature. He was witness to, and forger of, a baffling restoration of appearances. The stress of space determines form, but space as a measure is itself changeful, indeterminant. That indeterminancy is caught in the molten, eruptive surfaces of all of Giacometti's later works in bronze, and it is momentarily held in check by the tentative housings—the boxes, birdcage halos, and cloisters—that frame the heads in his oil portraits. The things from the major period seem to have been let go of, released, only moments before we bear secondary witness to their becoming. The blistered erosions of the busts seem still cooling. The isolated gestures—the head on a rod, the outstretched arm with its bony, panicked hand, the alarmed stillness of a cat, the dirt-hunger of a dog—seem a pause in the stream of pure becoming. If Giacometti's is an art of agony, it is because at its heart is an *agon,* the contest between space and matter and the intelligence which seeks to represent it. The slabs and blanks of the earlier work are gone, replaced now by the armature, the stake, where the work of the agon takes place.

With the emergence of the major style in the 1950s comes a more complex and fine-toned presentation of the female form. Each of the five sculptures from the *Women of Venice* series on exhibit at the Gianadda (Giacometti produced ten of them for the 1956 Biennale) bears a different sexual character. One figure's breasts are splayed, another's bulbous and low slung, another's melted nearly flat. In each, though, the breasts are sexual eruptions on an otherwise disinterested heraldic stillness. The ambiguous sense in each is of power restrained *and* a haughty indifference to that power. The measure of sexual availability varies from one to another. One figure's hands are fused to her thighs, the pelvic area recessive, protected, with no hint of sexual availability. In another, the entire torso is brittly concave, punched in, the belly reminiscent of the spoon-woman form; her shape bears a kind of unembarrassed sexual welcome, but her face is twisted into a sneer or grimace. The apparently candid invitation is chilled down by her sardonic, faintly contemptuous reserve. Giacometti's female figures never express the somnolent ecstasies of Brancusi's women, and they don't have the archetypal bombast of many of Henry Moore's queens and mothers. And yet the inflections

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of sexuality in his work are surprisingly rich. He commands nearly all the registers of the testing or trying out of sexual feeling, sexual mood. And unlike Brancusi's and Moore's representations of women, Giacometti's are not so easily owned by the male eye. Even when a figure seems most welcoming, that is never a pure tone; it is inescapably mixed with suspicion, regret, sullen withdrawal, or clenched aggressiveness. All this becomes painfully obvious by comparison with the most disconcerting and vulgar piece in the Gianadda show, the bust of *Mlle. Télé* (1962), where coquettishness is rendered in such conventionally vampish terms—the lifted shoulder, the cocked head, the "fetching" expression—that the figure's sexual charm is utterly trivialized. There is plenty of sexual charm in Giacometti's work, but it is only effective (and true) when blended with the sort of black magic that promises transformations at the edge of a darkness.

Like the free-standing constellation of the *Women of Venice,* the *Four Women on a Base* (1950) is remarkable for the painstaking differentiation of the figures. One pouts, one grins (rather mischievously), another cringes as if fearstruck. The fourth and tallest is clearly the dominant member of the clan. Each sexual gesture is different, measurable by the half-closed hands flaring from the hips. Their attitude, their stance, is a way not of occupying space but of inhabiting it, as if the air were their culture, shaping them while they shape it. Giacometti painted this, and many other bronzes, often at the last minute just before an opening. Once he made his breakthrough in the late 1940s, he could never leave his work alone: once back in his sight, "finished" paintings and sculptures were sucked back into the vortex of his desire for the impossible perfect representation. Usually, as in *Four Women on a Base,* he streaked or daubed the bronze with rouge, cream, or grayish tints. The first effect is to dramatize the topography of the figure, to provoke a reaction from light's impingements on matter. But the effect is particularly odd with female figures, as here, because it makes them at once gaudier and more intensely secretive, their sexual character enfolded more cunningly in disguise. For all their diversity, the four figures share their platform, the elevated rail or ledge that anchors them in space and also binds them in a tribal relation. It locates them, naturalizes them in what we can imagine to have been an unpopulated waste. From the 1940s on, the form that becoming takes in much of Giacometti's work is a risenness; the standing figures seem recently emerged from the ground—they are The First Ones. Before anything else they are expressions of vegetative force. Thus Giacometti gives the title *The Forest* to a group of seven standing figures and a small shrubby bust arranged on a shallow concave ground; and *The Glade* to a tribal grouping of nine odd-sized reedy figures. In both ensembles the human stalk rises from a warped, seething earth.

The genesis poetry prevails also in city representations. In *Homme traversant une place* (1949), the forward lean of the figure across his public space is retarded by the strangely crystallizing elasticity of the ground. He uses his spatular hands like paddles to coax his way free of the earth's pull. The viscous space he moves through drags him back even more. And yet his head and face are gnarled with resolve, beautifully detailed in the knot of muscle at his jaw. Giacometti's walking figures inevitably have a purposefulness which the standing figures lack. If the standing figures suffer the air of contingency, the walking figures lean into it, resisting its sorrows. The movement of *Walking Man II* (1960) is the quotidian tilt of curiosity tensed toward some destination; it is the will impelling matter away from the mud-pool. The squared, big-booted feet of walking and standing figures alike are the gritty, magmatic residue of material creation. The tree that Giacometti and Samuel Beckett collaboratively designed for a production of *Waiting for Godot* seems grown out of *The Leg,* which is seven feet high and looks like a young tree shattered by lightning. The two essential facts after the loss of Eden are that nothing is ever finished and that everything in some way fails.

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Giacometti's movie-house revelation deepened the sense of estrangement that followed his earlier loss of intimacy with nature, but it also initiated his journey into the mysteries of otherness, toward a recovery of the visible world in the forms of sculpture and painting. In his late work the will to encounter and recover takes the shape of auroral greeting. Not a gesture of hopeful anticipation, and not anything as vulgar as optimism, the greeting is a primeval moment in the strenuous task of becoming in which the figure acknowledges and goes out toward that which is other. The mood of the greeting, especially in the busts Giacometti produced in the mid-Fifties, changes from work to work—stoical, impatient, wondering, fearstruck, quizzical, arrogant, bemused—each expressing some sort of pained attentiveness on the long morning after the fall from Eden's golden unities. In *Diego au blouson* (1953), *Diego au chandail* (1954), and *Tête de Diego* (1955), all the inchoate force of the titan's torso rises up and concentrates in the roughened, charred ridges of the narrow head, which inhabits only a slot in space. And yet we cannot see past it. Its gaze stops us. Its acute attention is so aggressively outwarding that it traps our attention in its greeting. The tragic energy of these works is plied into the gashed, restless textures of the bronze.

The relation between Giacometti's sculpture and painting is one of the major conversations in modern art. On canvas he could shape and color the action of space around his subject, then translate those relations back into the volume and elasticity of clay. The pressure built up in the sheer bulk of a sculpted torso could not be achieved in the frontal, two-dimensional presentation of portraiture. The auroral greeting in the portraits is therefore fanatically concentrated in the face and eyes. In *Diego* (1958), *Portrait of Annette* (1958), and *Portrait of Yanaihara* (1959), the head unscrolls from a bituminous murk—the greeting is an arduous attempt to see out of an enveloping darkness. We can feel Giacometti trying, unhappily and with his typical sense of fated failure, to hack resemblance out of the resistant mass of undifferentiated colors. In these and later oil portraits, as you look away from the wiry loops and nodes of the darkened face—the eyes are craters, instruments nearly burnt out by overuse—the paint thins out, the scarifying blacks and blue-grays run a feebler smoky white. Portraiture, like sculpture, was for Giacometti expressive of the agony of its making. Just as he painted his bronzes at the last minute, he could not leave his paintings alone, either, so long as they remained in his studio. (James Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait* is noble testimony to that.) In three portraits of Diego done in 1964, the image is a history of the passionate self-corrective energy that brought the image into existence. Giacometti made a whole art out of pentimenti. First to finishing stroke, each act of figuration was in some way a pentimento. It was the only way he knew to arrive at a representation of what he called "the simple thing seen."

Around 1964, the emotional tone of the paintings changes. The febrile gaze of the 1950s portraits softens to a more aloof self-containment. The greeting is not so electric with the possibility of surprise or revelation. By this time the sculptures have changed, too. The heads thicken, broadening and filling out into more classically spherical forms, no longer so whittled and crimped by space. The two busts of Diego from 1965 included in this exhibition show at once tormented exertion and withdrawal, the neck craned forward, face buckled and sour, skull and shoulder cavities emaciated, cadaverous. The greeting is sustained only at great physical cost; the human form seems to be collapsing into itself, such is the effort to preserve its attentiveness. In an oil portrait of Diego from 1964, the subject's head is nearly lost to its black ground; out of the little dome shine splinters of light, like bird bones. The following year, however, Giacometti produced three of his finest works, the busts of Elie Lotar. Lotar was a sad familiar figure in Giacometti's circle, a failed photographer, destitute and alcoholic. (Giacometti not only used him as a model but

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also more or less took him in, letting him run errands and do odd jobs around the studio.) The torsos of the Lotar busts are more combustive than ever, but out of that turbulence rises a solemn, piercingly handsome, imperial head. The calm, alert eyes, welling out of deep pouches, cast the unsurprisable gaze of a being who greets the world by awaiting its manifestations. Desire, expectation, anticipation, all evaporate in the dispassionate regard of Lotar's gaze. The human figure is not resigned, certainly not self-abandoning, but it is no longer driven or terrified either. The strain of becoming so elaborately inflected in the previous work momentarily resolves here into a fearless *amor fati,* a condition just this side of irrational joy, though the figure expresses no joy at all.

Two of Giacometti's heroes were Giotto and Tintoretto. Early in his career he was overwhelmed by the Scrovegni Chapel frescoes, the figures "dense as basalt, with their precise and accurate gestures, heavy with expression and often infinitely tender." The weighty tenderness of the Lotar busts has its source in that early discovery. Giacometti said that Giotto replaced Tintoretto in his affections, though he had loved the Venetian's work "with an exclusive and fanatic love." And yet I think it is Tintoretto's influence that was most formative, especially for the work of Giacometti's later period. In formal terms, he took over the geometries of passion he found in Tintoretto, the smallish heads yearning from overmuscled, squarish bodies, the human figure—as in *Cain and Abel*—a bundle of volcanic torsions. And it is Tintoretto, not Giotto, who in his paintings for the Scuola di San Rocco gives us the carnal immediacy of mysterious emergences, transformations, and manifestations—image after image of agonized greeting. Giacometti, the least devout of men, possessed that sense of life as a suffering toward recognitions of reality which I think is the essence of heroic religious feeling. He believed not in redemption or arrival but in the fully experienced continuity of existence, in the need and desire to return to our imagined source, to the lost garden of perfect recognitions and representations.

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Diagnosis of a *Kulturkampf*

by David Gress

Allan Bloom is a political philosopher, a friend and disciple of the late Leo Strauss. He teaches at the University of Chicago, which appears more and more to be one of the only institutions of higher learning in this country where it is still possible to pursue knowledge and wisdom for their own sakes, where the administration does not believe that the purpose of the university is to "reflect the surrounding society." At Chicago, as he did earlier at Cornell, Professor Bloom has devoted himself to educating a few discerning students in the great tradition of Western thought, a tradition that once concerned itself above all with the most important things—namely, the question of the true and the good and the question of God. According to the Greeks and to virtually all Western thinkers up to Hegel, these questions were political questions, since no regime could endure unless its relation to the true, to the good, and to God was clarified. Politics was the arena where the most important things were debated, and a society that ignored that debate, or refused to engage in it, was no longer truly political, although it might continue for a while as a despotism, as Aristotle recognized.

Professor Bloom has now gathered his reflections in a book which is an extraordinarily accurate diagnosis of the current state of American civilization.[1] Some of the advance praise for the book has given the mistaken impression that it is wholly, or even chiefly, taken up with the conditions in American universities. In fact, the reader who wishes, or fears, an extended diatribe against the lowering of standards and against misguided attempts by administrations and faculty to conform to the prevailing left-liberal culture will be disappointed. Bloom does offer much criticism on these matters, but he embeds it in a wider "meditation on the state of our souls, particularly those of the young, and their education." The burden of that meditation is that American civilization is in great danger from those who do not understand that the purpose of education is to give students the power to form ideas of their own. Instead of being havens of independent thought, universities have become channels of indoctrination, inculcating attitudes regarded as respectable by the majority of American intellectuals and confirming the prejudices of those who control the agenda of public discourse. As Bloom shows, this problem, though much exacerbated by the cultural revolution of the Sixties, is in fact rooted in the Enlightenment belief that there is no conflict of purpose between the university and society. According to this belief, what the leaders of society and social opinion at any given time hold to be true should be taught as truth to the young.

1 *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students,* by Allan Bloom, with an introduction by Saul Bellow; Simon & Schuster, 392 pages, $18.95.

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As befits a philosopher concerned with truth and not with popularity, Bloom admits that his problem is one that belongs primarily to the elite.

> Most students will be content with what our present considers relevant; others will have a spirit of enthusiasm that subsides as family and ambition provide them with other objects of interest; a small number will spend their lives in an effort to be autonomous. It is for these last, especially, that liberal education exists. They become the models for the use of the noblest human faculties and hence are benefactors to all of us, more for what they are than for what they do. Without their presence (and, one should add, without their being respectable), no society—no matter how rich or comfortable, no matter how technically adept or full of tender sentiments—can be called cultivated.

What the present considers "relevant" in education is above all the idea that truth is relative. In his introduction, entitled "Our Virtue," Bloom shows how relativism, far from producing openness, has in fact produced the "closing of the American mind." This closing is expressed in the indifference of students to the particular virtues of Western culture and in the insistence on the part of their teachers that other cultures are equal or superior to the culture of the West. Thus teachers set standards of relevance and judgment whose effects ripple through society at large, until the closing itself is felt as natural. Even before coming to the university, students assume that "[t]he purpose of their education is not to make them scholars but to provide them with a moral virtue—openness." This education of openness "pays no attention to natural rights or the historical origins of our regime," Bloom writes, "which are now thought to have been essentially flawed and regressive." Where earlier teaching inculcated the republican principles on which the United States was founded, current teaching debunks those principles while vaguely assuming that they will endure this constant pounding. Bloom cites an example from his own student days. A history professor once explained that George Washington was really motivated not by love of freedom but by the class interests of the Virginia squirearchy. Bloom asked whether this picture "did not have the effect of making us despise our regime." The professor indignantly explained that the regime "doesn't depend on individuals but on our having good democratic values." When Bloom repeated that this was precisely the point—how can we believe in democratic values if those values are only the camouflage of class interests?—the professor got angry.

The teaching that truth is relative also implies that our own culture and regime are not worthy of particular respect simply because they are our own. Universities enforce this doctrine when they reject courses in Western civilization in favor of "nonbiased" courses that treat the histories of non-Western cultures with special favor. The central achievements of Western culture are no longer thought to be of any interest in themselves, because it is assumed they will offend members of other cultures or minority groups, all of whom are entitled to esteem. As the philosopher John Rawls taught in *A Theory of Justice,* esteem is a basic need; thus we are not allowed to discriminate or even, in Bloom's words, "to seek for the natural human good and admire it when found, for such discovery is coeval with the discovery of the bad and contempt for it. Instinct and intellect must be suppressed by education."

The belief in relativism and the debunking of Western culture are the result of a *Kulturkampf,* a struggle to control culture that is manifested in a broad campaign to control people's feelings and form their attitudes. In this *Kulturkampf,* Bloom's history professor, who reduced George Washington's professed beliefs to an expression of class interests, was only an advance guard. Today, we see the effects of this struggle in the inevitable tittering with which student audiences respond to invocations of patriotism, or in the reflex tendency to look for flaws and failures in American heroes or achieve-

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ments. We can feel the effects in ourselves in the considerable effort we must make to overcome an almost instinctive suspicion that, for example, a laudatory history of the United States and of American ideals, such as George Tindall's *America: A Narrative History* (1984), is somehow not an example of serious scholarship. Above all, the *Kulturkampf* is visible in the agenda of universities and of society, especially in the terms in which that agenda is formulated and in the presumptions it makes. A good way of measuring how the battle is going is to observe which positions seem perfectly natural, not requiring argument, and which are held to be indefensible. Among those taken for granted are the validity of relativism, the right of women and minorities to preferential treatment (in both the workplace and the college curriculum), and the presumption of American guilt in international affairs. In such a climate of received opinion, the ideas advanced by Bloom are anathema. That is why, although he praises the idea of the university as a place where the important questions are asked, he acknowledges that few, if any, American universities today are up to the task. The bulk of Bloom's book is an attempt to explain how the idea of the university and of liberal education got lost, and what the effects of that loss are.

Bloom starts, as it were, at the end of the process, with the effects. In the first of the three sections of his book, entitled "Students" (the other two are "Nihilism, American Style" and "The University"), he describes the characters of his students today, and what he describes is exactly, frighteningly reminiscent of C. S. Lewis's brilliant essay of 1941, "The Abolition of Man," in which Lewis describes the victims of modern pedagogy as "men without chests." To be without a chest, in Lewis's terms, is not only to be unheroic, it is to lack even the idea that heroism, virtue, or the hope of great achievements are admirable traits, worthy of praise or emulation. That lack can express itself in, say, the automatic ridicule of patriotism. But Bloom's students of the late 1980s are not, so far as one can judge, politically radical; their "chestlessness" denies them even the hope of revolution that possessed their precursors in the late 1960s.

Until the Sixties, when "the culture leeches, professional and amateur, began their great spiritual bleeding," American students were, in Bloom's view, the best in the world. They knew less when they came to university than European students, who had read great novels in school and were familiar with European intellectual and political history, but this lack of knowledge was richly compensated by a "natural savagery," manifested as a naïve eagerness to learn and a belief that knowing the great tradition of the West was important and rewarding. Ideas mattered, and the students were well served by their teachers. In 1955, Bloom contends, "no universities were better than the best American universities in the things that have to do with a liberal education and arousing in students the awareness of their intellectual needs." One reason for this high quality of American education at this time was that many exiles from Nazi Germany—the survivors of the destruction of the German universities who carried with them the great tradition—found new homes in the best American universities. Unfortunately, beginning in the mid-Sixties, the universities gave in to a violent minority of students until "the whole experiment in excellence was washed away, leaving not a trace. The various liberations wasted that marvelous energy and tension, leaving the students' souls exhausted and flaccid, capable of calculating, but not of passionate insight."

Bloom forcefully illustrates this debacle by example and commentary, and gives free rein to his considerable talent for dramatic irony. At Cornell University in 1969, to cite one instance, the faculty and administration surrendered completely to the demands of radical black students. The provost, who later became university president, refused to censure a black faculty member who had threatened the life of a black student for refusing to participate in a demonstration. Taxed by Bloom with this outrageous shirk-

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ing of responsibility, the provost said only that he "hoped there would soon be better communication with the radical black students." Bloom adds laconically: "This was a few weeks before the guns emerged and permitted much clearer communication." The provost, Bloom notes, had demonstrated "a mixture of cowardice and moralism not uncommon at the time." As for the president, he was "interested only in protecting himself . . . . He was of the moral stamp of those who were angry with Poland for resisting Hitler because this precipitated the war."

Appeasement seems too mild a term to describe the moral state of the majority of American professors in the face of the student revolt in the Sixties. Not only did they seem to have backbones made of limp spaghetti, they seemed to regard this trait as a sign of virtue. The teachers gave way to radical student movements, Bloom believes, "because they thought those movements possessed a moral truth superior to any the university could provide." This moral truth included the idea, for example, "that old ladies who work as secretaries for draft boards are the equivalent of the Beast of Belsen and deserve no more respectful treatment than she did." The old liberalism, which championed freedom of thought and expression, was redefined as an ideology of reaction. Professors who were happy in the Fifties to rely on academic freedom as protection from Joseph McCarthy rejected the notion of academic freedom for their opponents when their own opinions gained the favor of radical students.

In Bloom's view, the professors surrendered in the Sixties ultimately because none of them, or very few, had any coherent notion of the idea or purpose of a university or of higher education in general. They did not understand that, apart from all the other bad results, their appeasement only served to integrate the universities more completely into the "system of democratic public opinion, and the condition of cavelike darkness amidst prosperity feared by Tocqueville." Liberal social scientists like David Easton had already promised that "the great achievements of social science would be put in the service of the right values." But despite their vaunted critical faculties, these social scientists were incapable of finding values anywhere but in the left-liberal moralism of the surrounding culture.

Of course, the professors and the students justified their moralism by claiming that it was a necessary purification that would lead to a new, great era of moral and cultural vitality. Instead, they killed all vitality, producing the "homogenized persons" of today. "At worst," Bloom writes, "I fear that spiritual entropy or an evaporation of the soul's boiling blood is taking place, a fear that Nietzsche thought justified . . . . Today's select students know so much less, are so much more cut off from the tradition, are so much slacker intellectually, that they make their predecessors look like prodigies of culture."

This slackness is due in part to the effects of the *Kulturkampf* in the family, according to Bloom. Parents "no longer have the legal or moral authority they had in the Old World. They lack self-confidence as educators of their children," and yet they believe that they are somehow better and more enlightened than their ancestors. The combination of weak authority and a rejection of ritual, tradition, and the wisdom of old books produces children who "arrive at the university ignorant and cynical about our political heritage, lacking the wherewithal to be either inspired by it or seriously critical of it." Older generations had fewer sources of inspiration, but better ones: the Bible and Shakespeare instead of *Time*. They knew little about the ephemera of world politics or about the latest attitudes toward sex and the family—matters that dominate the talk of supposedly educated people today; but they were "linked . . . to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material." Without great revelations, epics, and philosophies "as part of our natural vision," Bloom writes, "there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside." The loss of this "longing for the beyond" produces, in Lewis's phrase, "men without

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chests," whose souls "are like mirrors, not of nature, but of what is around."

In Bloom's view, the loss of vision—of the very idea of vision—has devastated the intellectual capacity of today's students. Largely bookless, students lack the system of references and allusions that used to be the essential property of the educated Western man. How can the great books have any meaning to students who cannot even begin to grasp the point of *Anna Karenina*? For today's students, Bloom argues, Anna's problem is not tragic love but a "failed marriage," and they have all learned from their parents what to do about that, namely, get a divorce. Moreover, they see *Anna Karenina,* like all the novels, stories, and epics of Western literature, as "sexist." Such labels, Bloom concludes, not only discourage understanding but suppress the very notion that education can help "to free oneself from public guidance and find resources for guidance within oneself."

So what do students have today if they do not have books? For one thing, they have rock music, a form of entertainment which requires no intellectual effort and which appeals to the least noble aspect of our natures:

> Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy.

The glorification of sex in rock music, Bloom notes, is in reality a glorification of narcissism without a trace of the erotic; and its social philosophy is a cheapened version of what was already cheap, namely the moralistic egalitarianism and anti-patriotism of the Sixties. Bloom might have added that rock music—especially in its music-video form—is the very antithesis of the linear culture of reading. Psychologists have pointed out that a culture based on reading demands the exercise—and hence the refinement—of more complex, higher-order brain functions than are needed to absorb the messages of purely visual images or of sound. Thus, the flattening of character among post-literate Western students is supported by physiology.

As observed by Bloom, students today are "nice," not because they possess any nobility of character, indeed they frankly reject it as a desirable possibility, but because times are good. They have little sense of wonder, a lack that Bloom sees as closely related to their understanding of sex and sexual relationships. "The eroticism of our students is lame. It is not the divine madness Socrates praised; or the enticing awareness of incompleteness and the quest to overcome it; or nature's grace, which permits a partial being to recover his wholeness in the embrace of another, or a temporal being to long for eternity in the perpetuity of his seed; or the hope that all men will remember his deeds; or his contemplation of perfection." Rather, for today's students sex is mechanical and narcissistic and soul-deadening, because it has come too early in their lives.

> We properly sense that there is a long road to adulthood, the condition in which they are able to govern themselves and be true mothers and fathers . . . . I believe that the most interesting students are those who have not yet settled the sexual problem, who are still young, even look young for their age, who think there is much to look forward to and much they must yet grow up to, fresh and naïve, excited by the mysteries into which they have not yet been fully initiated. There are

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> some who are men and women at the age of sixteen, who have nothing more to learn about the erotic. They are adult in the sense that they will no longer change very much. They may become competent specialists, but they are flat-souled. The world is for them what it presents itself to the senses to be; it is unadorned by imagination and devoid of ideals. This flat soul is what the sexual wisdom of our time conspires to make universal.

This is a vitally important comment, even though I must register a rare disagreement with Bloom's choice of words. If his argument is correct, it is precisely *not* the case that sexually active students have "nothing more to learn about the erotic." In fact, they have everything to learn, but their behavior creates habits that make it unlikely they ever will.

In his section on social relationships, Bloom broadens his discussion to encompass the mores of society, thus demonstrating again that his book is not only about students or the university, but about American civilization as a whole. "Are the relations between men and women and parents and children determined by natural impulse or are they the product of choice and consent?" he asks. Clearly his own answer is the former, whereas the answer of modern culture is the latter. To act as though some sort of consent based on "democratic values" determines relationships which are actually determined by nature is, in Bloom's view, to close minds and invite disaster. He describes how "women's liberation" has liberated men from the obligation to care for their families and helped to create a vicious circle of shifting roles: as women demand the right to autonomous careers and an equal share of the responsibilities, they take away one important source of male pride and identity; the resulting male irresponsibility in turn appears to justify further the need for women to pursue careers. That economic conditions usually require two earners to produce a middle-class standard of living only increases the circle's speed.

The ideology of feminism, in Bloom's view, emancipated sex by taking away romance and by denouncing as sexist the traditional pursuit of women by men. "What sensitive male can avoid realizing how dangerous his sexual passion is? Is there perhaps really original sin? Men had failed to read the fine print in the Emancipation Proclamation. The new interference with sexual desire is more comprehensive, more intense, more difficult to escape than the older conventions . . . . The new reign of virtue, accompanied by relentless propaganda on radio and television and in the press, has its own catechism, including an examination of the conscience and the inmost sentiments for traces of possessiveness, jealousy, protectiveness—all those things men used to feel for women." This particular version of *Kulturkampf,* it should be noted, is peculiarly American; it is not found, at least to the same degree, elsewhere in the West.

In the university, the reign of virtue has taken many forms. Bloom singles out one of these—affirmative action—for special attention. He notes that the young share with their teachers a belief that everyone should be treated equally; but the prevailing ideology easily allows them to accommodate the hypocrisy of affirmative action. Bloom remembers when radical black students at Cornell in 1969 "demanded the dismissal of the tough-minded, old-style integrationist black woman who was assistant dean of students. In short order the administration complied with this demand." The end result of this type of behavior was "a debilitated normalcy." A kind of "black domain . . . was created: permanent quotas in admission, preference in financial assistance, racially motivated hiring of faculty, difficulty in giving blacks failing marks, and an organized system of grievance and feeling aggrieved."

The state of affairs Bloom describes is immediately familiar to anyone who spends much time at a university. It is profoundly demoralizing and creates a sort of virus of victimization that spreads far beyond the original "preferred groups." If the hiring or promotion of any black, or now of any

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woman, is suspect, then conversely the non-hiring or non-promotion of any white male is suspect as well. The truth of this was demonstrated recently when a Stanford history professor, who in general holds liberal views, was denied tenure and immediately entered a grievance claim, openly surmising in the campus newspaper that the decision had to do with his being a white male. Apparently even the academic supporters of affirmative action—most of whom, unlike this man, are at no risk, since they already have tenure—suffer from its effects. Things have gone very far indeed, although one is not tempted to feel much sympathy. After all, the ideology they subscribe to has created a moral, political, and economic morass with which we all have to contend.

If all these are the effects of the current *Kulturkampf,* what are its causes? To ask that question is to ask for an account of the entire course of modern politics and ideology. Bloom does not shrink from the task. Temporarily setting aside the closed minds and flat souls of today's best and brightest, he draws back to survey the ideas that underlie modern politics and social beliefs, ideas concerning human rights, nature, the self, creativity, and culture. The drama of American civilization, in Bloom's view, is the drama of how one version of those ideas, the version propagated by John Locke, has been undermined and partly superseded by the rival and contradictory vision of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

> Our nation, which seems to be a great stage for the acting out of great thoughts, presents the classic confrontation between Locke's views of the state of nature and Rousseau's criticism of them . . . . The same people who struggle to save the snail-darter bless the pill, worry about hunting deer and defend abortion . . . . This is the direct result of the two state-of-nature teachings. Locke's is responsible for our institutions, justifies our absorption with private property and the free market, and gives us our sense of right. Rousseau's lies behind the most prevalent views of what life is about and how to seek healing for our wounds.

Rousseau pointed out that Locke's natural man, concerned with self-preservation and property and hence with the rule of law, was not really very natural at all. He had neither higher aspirations nor dark, subterranean compulsions. According to Rousseau, Bloom explains, "Locke had illegitimately selected those parts of man he needed for his social contract . . . . The bourgeois is the measure of the price paid, he who most of all cannot afford to look into his real self, who denies the existence of the thinly boarded-over basement in him, who is most made over for the purposes of a society that does not even promise him perfection or salvation but merely buys him off. Rousseau explodes the simplistic harmoniousness between nature and society that seems to be the American premise."

The closing of the American mind, in the grand perspective of the ideological history of the past three centuries, is, then, the result of three converging factors: first, Locke's definition of human purpose as security and prosperity, a definition whose degenerate form is the flat-souled hedonism of today's young; second, Rousseau's justified criticism that such a definition ignores the human need for collective faith, a faith that would act as the glue of the social contract (from this criticism grows the constant insistence in American political life for goals higher than mere safety, a degenerate form of which was the moralism of the Sixties); third, the wholesale adoption of nihilism disguised as value relativism. "There is now an entirely new language of good and evil," Bloom writes, "originating in an attempt to get 'beyond good and evil' and preventing us from talking with any conviction about good and evil anymore . . . . The new language is that of *value* relativism, and it constitutes a change in our view of things moral and political as great as the one that took place when Christianity replaced Greek and Roman paganism."

The man who coined the phrase "beyond good and evil" was, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche, and it is Nietzsche who is

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Bloom's real interlocutor throughout the second half of his book. Fittingly, Nietzsche plays an ambiguous role. Bloom blames him for fatally undermining the West's belief that its hopes and highest aspirations were in accord with the true and the good, but also praises him for diagnosing a disease that was already incurable. The disease itself had already progressed through two stages: the Enlightenment had taught Europe that perfect concord between scientific progress, rational politics, and human betterment was possible; the French Revolution and the ideologies of nationalism and socialism had disproved and corrupted the Enlightenment's promise.

Nietzsche was thus the prophet who called for heroic endurance and achievement —not in order to overcome despair, but to live despite it. In America, however, Nietzsche was taken to prove that you can live with nihilism, and live successfully, without the need for heroism; America offered the possibility of "nihilism with a happy ending." The American temperament will not accept that there may be problems without solutions; it insists, rather, that reason and optimism can overcome all obstacles, that men are basically good, and that any flaws in society or individuals can be cured by reason or psychiatry. This elision of the tragic foundation of modern life has led, in Bloom's view, to the falsity and thinness of modern American culture, turning it into what Bloom calls, in one of his more memorable formulations, "a Disneyland version of the Weimar Republic for the whole family."

As Bloom points out, Sigmund Freud and Max Weber both followed Nietzsche in denying that reason could really govern human affairs. Nietzsche had said that the appeal to reason was really an expression of the will to power by people using reason as ideological camouflage. Freud demonstrated that what most of us consider good reasons for our behavior are in fact anything but that. "Weber," Bloom says, "found it impossible to prefer rational politics to the politics of irrational commitment." He argued that "reason in politics leads to the inhumanity of bureaucracy" and "believed that reason and science themselves were value commitments like any other commitments, incapable of asserting their own goodness . . . . Politics required dangerous and uncontrollable semireligious value positing." This was the point at which German nihilism diverged from the American version and accelerated rapidly toward disaster. One cause of that divergence was the somber, merciless consistency of the German thinkers. They methodically followed through the consequences of Nietzsche's announcement that God was dead and that good and evil were defunct categories of meaning, and they stated the results of their thinking with uncompromising clarity. Those who read Nietzsche, Freud, and Weber "constituted that ambiguous Weimar atmosphere in which liberals looked like simpletons and anything was possible for people who sang of the joy of the knife in cabarets."

By contrast, Americans found in Freud and Weber a wholly different message: namely, that the use of reason could defeat and bind the irrational compulsions that control behavior and could solve the problems of the death of God and the advent of mass democracy. Walter Kaufmann, not a critic with whom Bloom otherwise has much in common, once pointed out that the Freud Americans read is a curiously optimistic Freud, a Freud without his sting, a Freud who teaches that psychoanalysis really will cure the self and, by extension, society. The Freud read in Germany was a revealer of the dark basement below bourgeois society, one who promised at best a temporary palliative in individual cases, but whose fundamental message, in such late works as *Civilization and its Discontents* or *Moses and Monotheism,* was that social and individual progress is fragile and dubious at best, and at worst outweighed by its cost. This reading seemed only confirmed by the rise of Hitler and National Socialism, and by the philosophical justification of Nazism offered by another great disciple of Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger.

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As president of the University of Heidelberg in 1933-34, Heidegger gave his notorious *Rektoratsrede,* or president's speech, in which he said that Nazism was the unity of politics and philosophy and that it deserved the "affirmative support" of all thinking people. This speech appears as a focal point in the last section of Bloom's book, entitled "The University." For Bloom, it represents the extreme attained by those who took seriously the Enlightenment promise that human reason and politics ought to be allied. From the time of Socrates to the Enlightenment, Bloom points out, philosophers had believed that there was no natural alliance of political authority and philosophy, that the two were in fact naturally in conflict, that politics was a threat to philosophy. It was assumed that the search for the true and the good and the discussion of the most important things, which are the tasks of philosophy, would always be despised both by the rulers of the city—the political community—and by its citizens. If a philosopher wished to speak to the city, like Machiavelli, he could only do so by concealing his true message and pretending to speak the same language as the rulers.

Not long after Machiavelli's time, however, the natural opposition between philosophy and politics started to crumble under pressure of a new idea, that knowledge is power. If knowledge is indeed power, then the task of philosophy, namely to pursue knowledge, is a political task. Knowledge as power in turn became allied with another notion, that the purpose of power is human betterment and social progress. These two notions in combination created the constellation of the Enlightenment and its misplaced faith in the political use of reason.

Bloom refers to Weber's notion of the "last man," the character-type produced by—and in turn producing—the perfectly rational, bureaucratic society. The "last man," whom we could also call, following Lewis, the "chestless man," has solved the relation between reason and the human good and has achieved a kind of happiness at the price of forgetting what the real search for happiness was once about. The flatness of the last man's soul is the result of a philosophical, not a political, disaster. This is what differentiates the crisis of the West from the decline of Greek civilization or the end of the Roman Empire.

With the "last man"—who is happy because his purpose in life is to find values to believe in rather than to discover the good—we have come full circle. We are back with the students Bloom described at the beginning of his book. They think they are finding their own values, but they really have only two choices: they can follow nihilism to its conclusion and simply decide what to do as an act of will, indulging in irrational commitment for the mere sake of action; or they can reflect, in the mirrors of their souls, what is around them. In fact, the two choices are only one, as the Heidelberg students of 1933 and the Columbia students of 1968 demonstrated. Irrational commitment turned out in practice to be nothing other than the reflection of what was around.

The difference between finding values and discovering the good is, Bloom says, the same as the difference between the language of tradition (known to the grandparents of today's students) and the language of relativism, which does not allow the discussion of good and evil except as matters of opinion. The difference between these two languages is the real subject of Bloom's book, and the closing of the American mind in the name of openness is a measure of the victory of the language of relativism over the language of truth and error.

There is a fatal flaw in the language of relativism, however: it depends for its own validity on a rationalism that it implicitly denies. In a sense, relativism suffers from the liar's paradox: "Everything I say is a lie, including this sentence." One way out of the impasse is for the relativist to say that, whereas there is no such thing as discovering the good, there are areas of life, such as "the sacred," that have meaning for certain groups and individuals, and as such have a curious sort of provisional validity. Bloom easily disposes of this intellectual sleight-of-

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hand, concluding that "these sociologists who talk so facilely about the sacred are like a man who keeps a toothless old circus lion around the house in order to experience the thrills of the jungle."

Having described the grand history of nihilism in the Western mind, Bloom has one task left, and that is to relate that grand history to the smaller history of the university itself. Here the poignancy of his early chapters returns. The reader is made painfully aware that Bloom understands, perhaps better than anyone alive in America today, what the idea of the university is, and how little our universities live up to that idea.

Like Leo Strauss, Bloom chooses his language and his forms of expression very carefully, and the reader must be attentive not just to the message but to the precise way in which each argument is made. Bloom's language in speaking of the university is especially important, because in saying what the university *is* he is describing not the contemporary world but the ideal world. He is offering, I believe, a form of ironic incantation in the hope that a few of us might listen and try to bring about the reality he invokes. The university, according to Bloom, is the place where society permits philosophers "an eternal childhood . . . whose playfulness can in turn be a blessing to society." But society must have no expectations from the university other than that philosophers there will talk with one another about the most important things.

Bloom has not yet told us why he follows Plato in believing that true philosophers are at odds with the rest of society. In a chapter entitled "From Socrates' *Apology* to Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede,*" he takes up the question in a brief, almost parenthetical passage:

> The essential difference between the philosopher and all other men is his facing of death or his relation to eternity . . . . The question is how one lives, and only the philosopher does not need opinions that falsify the significance of things in order to endure them. He alone mixes the reality of death—its inevitability and our dependence on fortune for what little life we have—into every thought and deed and is thus able to live while honestly seeking perfect clarity. He is, therefore, necessarily in the most fundamental tension with everyone except his own kind. He relates to all the others ironically, i.e., with sympathy and a playful distance . . . he has no expectation of essential progress. Toleration, not right, is the best he can hope for.

Clearly for Bloom the Enlightenment alliance of knowledge and politics, of philosophy and society, was based on a misguided belief in a common purpose, and what is more, on a surrender of philosophy to the belief in progress which the philosophers from Plato through Machiavelli to Hobbes had denied. When philosophers started to believe in progress, politicians started to believe in the political utility of philosophy, and both sides began the slide down the slippery slope that ended in Germany in Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede.* In America today, university administrators argue less dangerously than Heidegger, but in furtherance of the same belief, that the university must be ministerial to society, that it should absorb socially respectable views and ideologies and communicate them to its students, thereby providing effective, useful citizens and effective, useful discoveries for society's leaders to use in their mastery of nature and man.

Bloom concludes his account of the career of knowledge by writing that "Heidegger's teachings are the most powerful intellectual force in our times." He then proceeds, in his penultimate chapter, "The Sixties," to prove this by example. In that unhappy decade, the *Kulturkampf* broke upon campuses that held more promise than ever before in American history. The result was the destruction of that promise and the final "snapping of the threads" that bound the noble American "savages" to the great tradition. The thread-snappers, students and faculty alike, "could waste the capital because they did not know they were living off of it. They returned to

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the university, declared it bankrupt and thereby bankrupted it. They abandoned the grand American liberal traditions of learning." As a consequence, not only are today's "nice" students "men without chests," but

> the university now offers no distinctive visage to the young person . . . . there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is. The question has disappeared, for to pose it would be a threat to the peace . . . . Out of chaos emerges dispiritedness, because it is impossible to make a reasonable choice. Better to give up on liberal education and get on with a specialty in which there is at least a prescribed curriculum and a prospective career . . . . The student gets no intimation that great mysteries might be revealed to him, that new and higher motives of action might be discovered within him, that a different and more human way of life can be harmoniously constructed by what he is going to learn.

What the students want, apparently, is the pale, disinfected security of non-racist, non-sexist, non-biased undergraduate courses, followed by professional school and a good job. What they need—and what they will not get unless they are lucky enough to be taught by Allan Bloom—is the discovery of the great tradition and, we must now add, of the history of how that tradition has been obscured and ridiculed.

The Closing of the American Mind finishes on what I think, given Bloom's argument, is an essential ambiguity. The promise of the modern university that science and society could be reconciled for the common good has failed. Yet if the promise is entirely dead, why bother to write the book other than as an obituary which no one could understand anyway? Bloom's somber conclusion is that, "just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they have never been before." An observer stationed at a leading university, as I am, would have to conclude that those who represent knowledge appear utterly oblivious to the responsibility Bloom recognizes. Nevertheless, as the German poet Hölderlin wrote, "Where there is danger/There also grows that which will save us."

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by Margaret Scolari Barr

with a chronicle of the years 1902-1929
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Glenway Wescott 1901-1987

by Bruce Bawer

To most literate Americans these days, the name probably means nothing. To some, who haven't read him but are aware of his reputation as an American expatriate writer contemporary with F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein, it may conjure up vague images of Paris, the Riviera, and the transatlantic literary scene *entre deux guerres*. To those select few that are acquainted with his best writings, however, the name of Glenway Wescott, who died on February 22 at the age of eighty-five, doubtless recalls a number of very fine things: sensitively drawn characters; a witty and perceptive eye for detail; a prose of wonderful, almost Flaubertian, control, elegance, and penetration; and, above all, a rare delicacy and honesty of feeling—but feeling that has been digested, disciplined, transfigured into art.

Like Fitzgerald (who was five years his senior) and Hemingway (two years), Wescott was a son of the Midwest—a Wisconsin farm boy, to be specific—who began publishing at a very young age. His twenties—which were almost congruent with the 1920s (he was born in 1901)—were extraordinarily productive. By the time he was thirty-one, Wescott had published two books of poetry, *The Bitterns* (1920) and *Natives of Rock* (1925); three novels, *The Apple of the Eye* (1924), *The Grandmothers* (1927), and *The Babe's Bed* (1930); a collection of stories, *Good-Bye, Wisconsin* (1928); numerous book reviews (written in his very early twenties for *Poetry, The New Republic*, and *The Dial*); and two idiosyncratic books of non-fiction, *Fear and Trembling* and *A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers*, whose failure on their publication in 1932 brought to an end this prolonged period of productivity. All of this writing was accomplished under the most unsettled of conditions. From the age of thirteen—when difficulties with his father forced him to leave home, and to live with his uncle and others—Wescott led a rambling life; after dropping out of the University of Chicago during his sophomore year, he spent periods in New Mexico, Wisconsin, Chicago, the Berkshires, New York, England, and Germany, finally settling in 1925 in France, where he remained until 1933.

The striking difference between Wescott's fiction of the Twenties and that of Fitzgerald and Hemingway is that Wescott's draws more explicitly on his family background. Compared to those two great contemporaries, Wescott seems to have felt more comfortable with himself and his parentage, more willing to accept—or, at least, to explore in his work—the overwhelming importance of his family, his Midwestern heritage, in the formation of his own character. While Fitzgerald was romanticizing his college days in *This Side of Paradise* and hinting elliptically at the depth of his feeling about his Minnesota upbringing in *The Great Gatsby*, and while Hemingway was writing about hunting and fishing in Michigan—but never about Mother and Dad in Oak Park—in numerous stories,

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Wescott was elaborately, almost compulsively, exploring his roots. Both *The Apple of the Eye* and *The Grandmothers* are based in large part on family stories that Wescott had heard, and on family events and situations that he had experienced.

The Apple of the Eye begins with a narrative of the rough and dreary life of Hannah Madoc, a rural Wisconsin spinster who, after her lover Jule Bier throws her over to marry Selma Duncan, becomes a bar girl, and then a broken-down hermit, old before her time, whose racy history has earned her the nickname "Bad Han." And yet Hannah's "badness" has provided her life with its only joy. "To her simple eye," Wescott writes, "nothing was degrading, nothing evil; everything formed a single difficult pure coil—moralless and pure." Years after Hannah's death, her story becomes a local legend to such young folk as Jule's daughter, Rosalia, and his girlish, moody fifteen-year-old nephew, Dan Strane (based on Wescott), who is devoted to sexual purity and to his deeply religious mother. Mike Byron, the Stranes' hired man, tries to change the boy's ideas about the impurity of sex, telling him that "everything is pure, everything is good that doesn't hurt somebody else." Dan becomes very attached to Mike, and when Mike and Rosalia fall in love and have an affair, Dan feels himself to be a part of it. But when Mike leaves, and Rosalia—suddenly horrified by the sins they have committed—kills herself, Dan blames Rosalia's death on Mike's "exaltation of sensuality, his evil love of life." Yet by and by, he discovers that even his uncle Jule doesn't blame Mike; instead, Jule suggests that "what is taught people, religion and morals and so on, are mostly to blame," and tells Dan the story of Hannah, who "knew the way to live." Hannah's life becomes a beloved myth for the boy, and at the end of the novel he goes away to college, his mother "praying for the perfection of his life," Dan knowing that there can be no perfection, that his "business was to go on, just to go on," and that there is nothing wrong with taking pleasure where he finds it.

The Apple of the Eye is a peculiar hodgepodge of a book. It reads at the beginning like a Midwestern cross between *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *Ethan Frome*, segues after Hannah's death into an all-white variation on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (with Rosalia's mad scenes briefly evoking *Hamlet* IV:v), and ends up, after Rosalia's death, as a sort of minor-league Willa Catherish *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But *The Apple of the Eye* is not as good as any of these works, and Wescott, in 1924, was not yet as skilled as any of their authors. Especially in the opening chapters, the novel's style is extremely stiff; every word seems an effort, and not a sentence flows naturally. Wescott's descriptive passages, and his metaphors and similes—many of them relating to nature, for he manifestly wants this to be a book of sensations, of sensuality, in which human sexual cravings and consummations and the smells and breaths and sounds of nature are intimately bound together—feel particularly forced and overdone: he cannot mention Hannah's barns without referring to their "bitter scent" or "fragrant gloom," cannot mention the cows inside the barns without speaking of their "profound mottled eyes and brutal lips" and "pure plush voices" or describing them as "[s]hadowy cattle [that] creaked in their wooden stanchions." Wescott hardly lets a noun into the book without gratuitously or clumsily modifying it ("the tawny marshes and harsh grasses," the "infrequent hairs" on Hannah's father's head and the "capable, fat hands" of the local doctor), hardly mentions an object without ingeniously comparing it to something else ("the herds of waterfowl in insubstantial letters on the sky," the crows with "their square notched wings like ragged sails"). In short, he tries too hard. For all the talk of passion, moreover, *The Apple of the Eye* is for the most part an inert object. We have to take Hannah's sensuality and Rosalia's sexual conflict—both of which are central to the novel—entirely on faith; the only truly believable character is in fact Dan Strane, and the only believable attraction that between Dan and Mike.

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Wescott's second novel, *The Grandmothers*, subtitled "A Family Portrait," established him as one of the major American novelists of his generation. It is in every way an improvement over *The Apple of the Eye:* its style is assured and natural, many of its characters are three-dimensional, and it is quite affecting in the way that Wescott intended it to be. The book's focal character, Alwyn Tower—whose first and last names are quasi-anagrams for Glenway Wescott, as well as emblems of the boy's ambition and idealism (*all win tower*)—is, like Dan Strane, a version of Wescott himself; like Dan, too, with his devotion to the myth of Hannah Madoc, Alwyn is a student of his family's legendary past. *The Grandmothers*, indeed, is about the history of the Towers in Wisconsin, as that history exists in the consciousness of the young Alwyn Tower.

The book begins with two chapters entitled "The House" and "Alwyn's Knowledge of America and His Family," in which Alwyn—now a very young man moving in high-toned European circles—remembers being surrounded, during his Wisconsin childhood, by

> grandparents, and their friends, and old cousins, and great-aunts, and uncles; and behind each one a life had extended into the past like a corridor—poorly lighted, long corridors winding away in every direction, through reticence and forgetfulness, to their youth; and in the ring of rocking-chairs, the child for whose existence all the corridors had come together, had shivered in the gusts of emotion which blew vaguely down them, and tried to understand the strange syllables which echoed from one life to another.

Growing up, Alwyn "had noted every word of sentences he was not expected to understand, and added each detail, in his memory, to its proper nucleus. Little by little he had uncovered the life of his elders; little by little he had grown up . . . ." And throughout his adolescence and early manhood he had continued "[t]rying to understand, for his own sake, [the] shadowy men, women, and children [of his family]," for he felt that if he could come to understand the lessons of his forebears' lives—the lessons of their loves and hates, tragedies and failures—his own future would be less of a riddle, and he would be less likely to devote himself to "useless ambitions" or to be hampered by "unreasonable aversions." And gradually the story of his family did take shape in his mind, a story of solemn and pious people who had worked hard and never prospered as they deserved to, a story of a "long series of passions which had in the end produced himself." He discovered that their lives had ended in regret, a regret "which weakened and then strengthened his will: regret that the time for laughter and ease, even for him, seemed never to come, while work never came to an end."

The opening chapters of *The Grandmothers* are succeeded by a dozen chapters with titles like "His Mother's Girlhood and Marriage" and "His Great-Aunt Nancy," each telling the story of a different member of Alwyn's family. The first of these chapters is about his grandfather Tower, a small man whose early years had been exciting and tragic: he brought the family from New York to Wisconsin, suffered great hardship, fought in the Civil War, lost his first wife to a fever, and married his brother Leander's abandoned sweetheart, Rose Hamilton. As with Bad Han, things settled down after those early adventures, and "[t]he rest of his life seemed unimportant." Subsequent chapters tell the stories of Grandmother Rose Tower; Alwyn's bachelor uncle Leander (who as a young man was adored not only by Rose but by his younger brother Hilary, a relationship that closely echoes Mike and Dan's in *The Apple of the Eye*); of Uncle Evan (an Army deserter); and so forth. What is interesting about all these chapters—these lives—is the way in which they fit together, and at the same time do not. The lives of the Towers are like facets of a gem; however close they may be to one another, each views the world from a different window. The profoundest passions and longings of one remain a secret to most of

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the others for decades; events which assume cataclysmic significance in one life are mere footnotes in another; one person's trifling action changes another's life forever. The lives of the Towers, then—like the lives of all families—are at once elaborately interwoven and utterly separate.

There are many similarities between *The Apple of the Eye* and *The Grandmothers.* Both reject the notion that a novel should concern itself throughout with the adventures of a single protagonist. (Indeed, Wescott's practice, in *The Grandmothers,* of shifting from one character's perspective to another as a means of telling a family's story is reminiscent of *To the Lighthouse,* which was published in the same year.) Both novels trace the events of a young man's life as well as events—which to him are no less than mythic—in his family's past; in both novels, what the young man learns about those past events helps him to decide upon the course he will take in life. There are also several more specific parallels. Dan and Alwyn, for example, both have mothers who are "saint[s] on earth," eager for their sons to live purely; both boys have unsympathetic fathers who love to hunt and are not very cerebral.

As in *The Apple of the Eye,* moreover, there is sometimes too much needless description of landscapes and animals in *The Grandmothers*; lists of farm chores and house furnishings and the like abound. It is as if Wescott wants to preserve every impression he remembers from childhood, every anecdote he has heard; as if he wants to provide as thorough an account as possible of the way these people lived. Despite this occasional tendency to go overboard with detail, however, on the whole the book works marvelously. There is something wonderfully mature about it, about its quiet recognition that we are all the products of our families, and that the better we understand them the better we can understand—and create—ourselves. At the end of the novel Alwyn opts for a life different from those his antecedents have lived, and Wescott applauds this decision, and wants us to do the same; but this does not prevent him from regarding the lives and choices of the other members of the family with awe and humility and respect. Indeed, it is in large part Wescott's tacit but powerful respect for the past that makes the book so affecting. To be sure, there are tedious passages, and it might be argued that the book is less than the sum of its parts—for the "lessons" that Alwyn has learned from his examination of the family history are never spelled out very plainly. Wescott does intimate, however, that Alwyn is in some way like his old bachelor uncle Leander, and that the lessons he has learned —like Dan's—have a good deal to do not only with choosing not to be a Wisconsin farmer but with defying the conventional Tower attitudes toward sexual behavior. *The Grandmothers* is in a sense an *apologia pro vita sua*—a declaration by Wescott of his great loyalty and affection for his country, state, and family, along with an attempt to account for his departure from them and their traditions. It is certainly the best of Wescott's full-length novels.

In both *The Apple of the Eye* and *The Grandmothers,* however, Wescott's explanations of his young heroes' motivations are less than completely candid; to read either of these books is to have the sense that something of consequence is being dealt with but never explicitly acknowledged. That subject is homosexuality. The fact is that Wescott was homosexual; his longtime companion was Monroe Wheeler, at one time a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, whom Wescott met in his teens and lived with into his old age. The otherwise puzzling events of Wescott's early years—the difficulties with his father that forced him to leave home at age thirteen, and a suicide attempt at age eighteen (at which time he was engaged to be married to a young woman), followed by his withdrawal from college—seem to make more sense if one knows that he was homosexual. So, for that matter, does the eight-year silence that followed the publication of *A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers* in 1932. In his early novels and stories, Wescott—who was plainly, at that point, an autogiograph-

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ical writer—had exhausted the material of his childhood and youth. What was left for him to write about? *The Grandmothers* reads like a prolegomenon to a body of autobiographical fiction, a series of novels centered on Alwyn Tower's adult life—and for Alwyn Tower, of course, read Glenway Wescott. But in the 1930s Wescott could hardly write about the life he was leading with Monroe Wheeler. In *The Grandmothers* he had written a book about a family, a book that almost anyone could identify with; but few readers, at that time anyway, would have regarded an equally sensitive and candid novel based upon Wescott's adult domestic life with anything other than horror.

The publication of *Fear and Trembling* and *A Calendar of Saints* at the very end of his long period of productivity suggests that Wescott may have been contemplating a switch to non-fiction. If so, the dismal reception of those books must have killed that idea. This is not to suggest that the reception was undeserved. Indeed, whereas Wescott's best novels and stories were masterpieces of restraint, some of his non-fiction was downright undisciplined and self-indulgent. The deliberately outrageous *A Calendar of Saints* may be the most egregious instance of this; it consists of sardonic versions of the saints' lives, the overall point being that the saints' unyielding idealism, far from being admirable, was tragically self-defeating. (This rejection of the concept of perfectibility is reminiscent, incidentally, of the end of *The Apple of the Eye.*) *A Calendar of Saints* strikes one as a book that Wescott—obviously raised in a pious environment—had to get out of his system; that it was published in a limited edition indicates that Wescott knew it would have extremely limited appeal.

By contrast, the ignominious failure of *Fear and Trembling*—a longer and far more ambitious book—seems genuinely to have shocked him (and continued to embarrass him decades later). The book—which is based upon the observations made by Wescott and three of his friends (including Wheeler) while touring Europe by car in 1931—attempts not only to understand, but to provide a set of solutions to, the dauntingly complex international crisis that was then taking shape in Europe. But the book has little to offer aside from unsupported overstatements, wild poetic surmises, and euphuistically rendered impressions. It is naïve and facile, redundant and self-contradictory; Wescott behaves as if everything he notices, and each inchoate conclusion that pops into his head, is worth our attention. This would be an unfortunate posture under any circumstances, but given the dreadful solemnity of his principal subject, it is truly offensive. Indeed, for all its supposed seriousness, the book contains many flippant passages, campy asides, tongue-in-cheek quips, irreverent anecdotes, discussions of where in Europe he'd most like to live, and the like. It is tasteless to mix such material in with sentences like the following:

> We passed under a tree laden with green apples, also bearing in its branches at the moment two brown hungry boys who, when they have ripened a little, will make very good eating for one of those new short guns with wide mouths.

Placed in its context in *Fear and Trembling,* this sentence strikes me as stupefyingly callous. If Wescott really believed these boys would die in a war within the next few years (as perhaps one or both of them did) he shouldn't have written about their fate so glibly, should have seen the tastelessness of discussing his pleasure jaunt and these boys' tragic fate in the same work. Wescott seems almost smug in his awareness that he will be able to escape to America in the event of a European war, whereas these boys will have to tough it out, perhaps fight, perhaps even sacrifice their lives.

For all his impatience with idealism, furthermore, Wescott's supposed solutions to the European crisis are ridiculously unrealistic. Here's his standard ploy: he names an obvious problem, and his "solution" is to say that the problem must be eliminated. Take the problem of militarism and xeno-

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phobia. Solution: "The martial impulses must be paralyzed, the national liberties must be taken away . . . ." Another prescription: the West needs "renewed faith in wealth"—or, to put it differently, "[t]he better practice of luxury by a few persons on a larger scale." (The best that can be said for this opinion is that it must have taken a great deal of courage to hold in the literary and intellectual world of the Thirties.) Not that wealth is better than poverty. *Au contraire,* the poor are better off poor: if they were rich they'd be more sybaritic, less strong and healthy (for the "genuinely and purely poor," he writes, are *always* healthy). Indeed, "poverty may be merely an unforeseen sort of wealth." And besides, the workers are as a rule "a good deal handsomer than their masters." (Handsomeness, by the way, is a topic that the very handsome Wescott returns to frequently, and often disconcertingly, in *Fear and Trembling*—remarking, for example, upon the "wondrously handsome" faces in the photographs of the Bolshevik hordes.) Among Wescott's other prescriptions: the bourgeois have "made a mess of his world" and now it should be "the neurotic's turn"; children should be given the vote; inferior couples should be sterilized. Like many in the 1930s, Wescott pronounces democracy a failure. But unlike many, he seems not to have understood quite clearly that what was shaping up in Europe was a decisive confrontation between democracy and tyranny, and that for all the problems of democracy, its survival was essential to the maintenance of everything that he valued.

After his silence of the Thirties, Wescott produced two more long works of fiction, *The Pilgrim Hawk* (1940) and *Apartment in Athens* (1945). The former, a novella, is perhaps his most nearly perfect work—taut, subtle, and exquisitely ordered. It takes place on a single afternoon in May of 1928 or 1929—the narrator, Alwyn Tower, can't quite remember which, since so many years have passed—in a house at Chancellet, outside of Paris, where he then lived with his "great friend Alexandra Henry," also known as Alex, who would later marry his brother. On that May afternoon some friends of Alex's, a rich, foolish Irish couple named Larry and Madeleine Cullen, come to visit, bringing with them Mrs. Cullen's new pilgrim hawk, Lucy. Mrs. Cullen's affection for, treatment of, and remarks about Lucy (particularly about her hunger) cause Alwyn to think about, and to see the hawk as a symbol of, a variety of things. For instance, Mrs. Cullen's observation that falcons feel hunger more intensely than people makes Alwyn reflect that "[a]lthough I had been a poor boy, on a Wisconsin farm and in a slum of Chicago and in Germany in 1922, I could not recollect any exact sensation of hunger, that is to say, hunger of the stomach." But he thinks of the other hungers he has known:

> For example, my own undertaking in early manhood to be a literary artist. No one warned me that I really did not have talent enough. Therefore my hope of becoming a very good artist turned bitter, hot and nerve-racking; and it would get worse as I grew older. The unsuccessful artist also ends in apathy, too proud and vexed to fly again, waiting upon withheld inspiration, bored to death.

He thinks about sexual hunger, too, about the fact that "[y]outhfulness persists, alas, long after one has ceased to be young. Lovelife goes on indefinitely, with less and less likelihood of being loved, less and less ability to love, and the stomach-ache of love still as sharp as ever. The old bachelor is like an old hawk." And as Alwyn continues to observe the hawk, his sense of identity with it intensifies, his emotions sharpen: "old bachelor hungry bird," he thinks, "aging-hungry-man-bird, and how I hate desire, how I need pleasure, how I adore love, how difficult middle age must be!"

And how difficult marriage. The novella is largely about the Cullens's marriage and about Alwyn's attitude toward it. It is not a perfect marriage, for although they are very much in love, Larry resents the hawk enormously; it's a terrible nuisance and an

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embarrassment, he tells Alwyn, and often comes between them in the most hurtful ways. Consequently, when Madeleine puts Lucy out in Alex's garden, Larry covertly cuts its leash, removes its hood, and lets it fly away. And yet, after the bird has enjoyed a few moments of freedom, it returns willingly to Mrs. Cullen—for it is still hungry. Alwyn, having been thrilled by the bird's freedom, equally enjoys "the little spectacle of her capture or surrender," and is surprised at himself for this. His reaction makes him aware "of my really not wanting Larry Cullen to escape from Mrs. Cullen either, or vice versa. Perhaps I do not believe in liberty, or I regard it as only episodic in life; a circumstance that one must be able to bear and profit by when it occurs; a kind of necessary evil. When love itself is at stake, love of liberty as a rule is only fear of captivity."

What happens in *The Pilgrim Hawk,* in short, is that Alwyn Tower, now fortyish, remembers a day in his late twenties—the twilight of his youth—when the visit of a troubled married couple with a hungry hawk caused him to think about his own hungers, and to see clearly the future ahead of him: no marriage, no writing. But much remains unspoken in the novella. What, for instance, is the relationship between Alex and Alwyn? Apparently they lived together for a considerable length of time—Alwyn, after all, can't remember what year it was in which the Cullens visited—but, judging from the way they talk to each other about sex and love, there is no romance between them, no physical relationship. They are not lovers but *Doppelgängern,* two seemingly carefree young unmarrieds who in truth find themselves rather envying even a very troubled and tacky married couple and who fear a lonely, unproductive future full of unsatisfied longings. (Their likeness is symbolized, incidentally, by the similarity of their names.) The difference between them, however, is that Alex will eventually marry and Alwyn will not. As in *The Apple of the Eye* and *The Grandmothers,* the unmentioned subject here is homosexuality: it is not absolutely necessary, to be sure, that one assume Alwyn to be homosexual, but it makes his certainty about his increasingly lonely, marriageless future far more understandable.

The Pilgrim Hawk was not Wescott's first work to deal with marriage. The short stories that he published in *Good-Bye, Wisconsin* in 1928 are full of weddings, which invariably symbolize an end to possibility and the beginning of captivity. In a story called "The Wedding March," for instance, the wedding bell, in the mind of a young groom, becomes "a death knell," and the walls of the church in which the wedding takes place are described as being "the color of a tomb." Similarly, at the end of "The Whistling Swan," the story's young protagonist, who has been planning to go to Paris and become a great composer, decides instead to stay in Wisconsin and (probably) to "hold his peace —a dumb, wholesome, personal peace. Talk about Paris, who cared, who cared? . . . That night he accepted the offer of the college in the south of the state, and agreed with Muriel to be married at once." To marry, in these youthful stories, is to deny oneself, to repeat the mistakes of one's forebears, to head down the same bleak, well-worn, unsurprising path. In *The Pilgrim Hawk* Alwyn recognizes that, for all the grotesqueries and limitations of marriage, it may not, in truth, be the grimmest of all possible fates. The things he avoided marriage in order to pursue—his writing, his love life—seem to him to have little future in them, and what will he have when they're gone completely? For the first time, perhaps, Alwyn sees that he will not "*win all.*"

The Pilgrim Hawk is an exemplary novella in the classic tradition, its manner stately and elliptical, its characters subtly and ironically etched. Wescott weaves together his various themes—art and love, freedom and captivity, desire and satiation—with great elegance. And yet, in this work that may represent the height of his achievement, he essentially accuses himself of having little talent and hints that his awareness of this failing is responsible not only for the preceding eight-year dry spell but for the

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dry spells that will follow. (Interestingly, in his entry in *Twentieth Century Authors,* published two years after *The Pilgrim Hawk,* Wescott echoed this self-evaluation: "I have had good luck in every respect but one; my talent has not seemed equal to my opportunities or proportionate to my ideas and ideals . . . .") William H. Rueckert, in his Twayne-series study of Wescott, even goes so far as to say that *The Pilgrim Hawk* is "Wescott's goodbye to fiction and to himself as a novelist."

Though Wescott was to publish one more novel after *The Pilgrim Hawk,* in a sense it does represent a leave-taking, for it was his last major fictional work in which the protagonist is plainly a variation on the author. *Apartment in Athens,* by contrast, is a completely fictional work—even, one might say, a completely impersonal book, an act of creative will. Described by Wescott at the time as his "war work," it tells the story of the Helianos family of Athens—Nikolas, a middle-aged publisher; his wife; their retarded ten-year-old daughter, Leda; and their sickly twelve-year-old son, Alex—during the German occupation, when a captain named Ernst Kalter is billeted in their house. Nikolas believes in cooperating with the cruel, insensitive Captain Kalter; it wouldn't do any good, he feels, to be heroic. When Kalter, having been promoted to major, returns from a brief trip to Germany a much sadder and kinder man, Nikolas is eager to take advantage of this change, eager to fan the flames of humanity in Kalter's soul; he becomes a sort of confidant, or at least sounding-board, for Kalter (who eventually explains his newfound gentleness and despondency by saying that he has recently lost his wife and two sons in the war). The two men discuss the war, and when Kalter confesses his weariness of it, Nikolas expresses his sorrow that two men, the Führer and the Duce, could bring such tragedy upon so many other men. And it is this remark that seals his doom. At once Kalter reverts to being the cold-blooded representative of an occupying power; summarily he has Nikolas arrested and imprisoned.

Up to this point *Apartment in Athens* seems nearly flawless. Unerringly structured and paced, it is the sort of meticulously wrought novel—with a Hellenic austerity and lack of sensationalism—that is criticized by some for being cold, artificial, fussy, labored; yet in truth there is not a single false note in it. After Helianos is sent to prison, however, the book changes abruptly. The story goes limp, and Wescott becomes tiresomely didactic. The closing pages of the book, indeed, are reminiscent of one of those World War Two-vintage movies whose conclusions dispense with the need for a proper dramatic climax and denouement and offer instead a non-sequitur pep talk directed at the audience. (Diana Trilling, in *The Nation,* was particularly hard on Wescott for taking this didactic turn, complaining that the book was not much different from dozens of other anti-Nazi novels she had read. "We don't expect a writer of Mr. Wescott's caliber," she complained, "to use his talents in the service of propaganda.") But to blame the weak ending on the wartime atmosphere would be misleading, for, as Edmund Wilson justly observed at the time, the endings of Wescott's works of fiction are generally their weakest parts. "The incisive beginnings," Wilson wrote, "are sometimes betrayed by a tendency to blur at the close; the sure hand, with its deliberate strokes, seems to falter when it comes to the point of drawing the action to a head and driving the meaning home."

Its ending notwithstanding, *Apartment in Athens* is a very fine book. Considering that Wescott was nowhere near Greece during the war, it is something of a tour de force, for it captures convincingly the Helianos family's sense of oppression, their painful conflict between pride and the instinct for survival. Why is the book set in Greece? Primarily, one has the impression, because in important ways the Greeks and the Germans form a sharp contrast to one another. First, in attitudes toward fate: "You naturally are afraid of fate," Kalter tells Nikolas. "We are not afraid, because we have identified with it, we are active in it, we are it. What-

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ever happens, yes, we have the satisfaction of knowing that we have helped it along, with all our might, with a whole heart. If it is not what we expected we care little—it is a change, it is creative! Nothing we have had anything to do with will ever be the same again." What's more, the Greeks consider "private life greater than public life, which [is] the opposite of German principle." Finally, Germans are utopians; they believe in the possibility "that one day at last the world will be well-governed, by those willing and able and worthy to govern it—not always in a mess as it is now." Greeks are more realistic. (This is one way, at least, in which *Apartment in Athens* can be thematically connected to Wescott's earlier fiction: just as *The Apple of the Eye* and *The Grandmothers* contrast the sexually realistic attitudes of Dan and Alwyn with the religious utopianism of their mothers, so *Apartment in Athens* contrasts the socially realistic attitude of Helianos with the Nazi utopianism of Major Kalter.)

During the more than four decades that followed the appearance of *Apartment in Athens,* Wescott published only one book, *Images of Truth* (1962). It is a collection of eight long, highly impressionistic critical essays about six writers—Katherine Anne Porter, Somerset Maugham, Colette, Isak Dinesen, Thomas Mann, and Thornton Wilder—all of whom Wescott admired greatly and most of whom he knew personally. (The book's subtitle is "Remembrances and Criticism.") The book is gracefully conversational, and demonstrates considerable critical acuity and—even more so—a charming gift for appreciation. But it is most valuable, perhaps, for what it tells us about Wescott's literary tastes. He is, to judge by his remarks, a foursquare anti-modernist and a lover of small, elegant, well-ordered books that attempt to illuminate a character or situation. Wescott confides that he dislikes Virginia Woolf for her "herculean minutiae of form and style," and that he doesn't care much for Henry James because—strangely enough—James was the first important writer to evade "the responsibility of omniscient understanding"; he cites *The Golden Bowl, Finnegans Wake, The Making of Americans,* and *The Trial* and *The Castle* as "arch-examples of the withering away or frittering away of the novelist's old authoritativeness, and general and objective knowledge, and firm grasp of human nature." There is no significant mention in the book of either Fitzgerald or Hemingway. Wescott admires Maugham and Colette because they "have systematized their novel writing and narrowed it down, in order to combine a measure of craftsmanship and fine finish with a desired expeditiousness and productivity." He calls Colette's *Le Pur et l'Impur* "a work of gospel truth" which "has greatly guided me in my own life and love life." (Certainly the notion that there is nothing impure about consensual sex is central to much of his fiction.)

His two favorite English-language novels published in his lifetime would seem to be Wilder's *The Ides of March* and Maugham's *Christmas Holiday.* Both are works of "political allegory," but neither is a "propaganda novel"; rather, both are concerned with the "human equation." Wilder's novel about the assassination of Julius Caesar appeals to him "more . . . than any other novel by a fellow American of my generation" because it gives an "extraordinary impression of a fate running its course." Maugham's is one of the best novels of the century because it "explains more of the human basis of fascism and nazism and communism than anyone else has done." To read Wescott's encomia for these two books —one need not even be familiar with the novels themselves—is to recognize that at least one thing he was trying to do in *Apartment in Athens* was to explain, by focusing on the character of a single human individual, Major Kalter, the nature and workings of the Nazi mentality. (It is worth noting that Wescott has nothing to say about such larger, noisier novels of World War Two as *The Naked and the Dead.*)

In the last twenty-five years of his life Wescott published next to nothing. Though

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he reportedly continued to write, he was presumably unable to complete a book—to his satisfaction, anyway. Until his final days he resided in the New Jersey farmhouse which he had occupied since 1943. But he was no Salingeresque hermit: he was very active in the American Academy of Arts and Letters (serving as its president from 1959 to 1962) and other writers' organizations, and was a familiar face at high-society soirees on both sides of the Atlantic. He also continued to keep a diary, which is said to be perhaps his most provocative production of all, with its commentary on his famous friends and acquaintances and its candid accounts of Wescott's own sexual exploits; a brief and intriguing portion of it, entitled "Paris 1938," appeared in the inaugural issue of *Grand Street*.

Until such time as Wescott's diary is released to the world, however, we have his fiction—a sophisticated body of work that is, alas, less appreciated than it should be. He was at once an accomplished stylist and a gifted observer of human behavior, good at manners and morals, at little details and little ironies; he observed the way people cheer themselves up out of momentary dark moods by being eloquent at small talk, observed the subtle interplay of suspicion and resentment and envy and love that takes place between a husband and wife in the course of a seemingly inconsequential dinner-party confrontation. He was, to be sure, intent upon knowing himself, and *did* know himself, but somehow managed not to be full of himself. There is in his finest work an appealing gentleness and humility for which, despite all their brilliance, many of the indubitably greater fiction writers of his time are not especially known. Somehow he seems to have been able to accept his failings more easily than they could accept theirs. He didn't play roles, didn't pretend to be better than he was or something other than what he was, or to know things that he didn't know. He knew in fact that he was less than perfect, and that his talent was less than perfect, and he seems to have managed to have lived a relatively serene life with this knowledge. (This, come to think of it, may be why his stories don't end as decisively, as strongly, as they might: because he didn't want to pretend to be more certain than he was of what the final outcome of his heroes' decisions would be, what the future would hold, what the ultimate point was.) To read the body of work that he has left behind is not only to marvel at its charm and polish but to admire its probity and seriousness of purpose—a seriousness that is evident even in his most precocious fiction. That Glenway Wescott has fallen into near-obscurity is a measure less of his own failings than of the misbegotten values of the literary culture that has allowed him to fall.

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Poems *by Jane Kenyon, David R. Slavitt & Peter Davison*

September garden party

We sit with friends at the round
glass table. The talk is clever;
everyone rises to it. Bees
come to the spiral pear peelings
on your plate.
From my lap or your hand
the spice of our morning's privacy
comes drifting up. Fall sun
passes through the wine.

—Jane Kenyon

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After the dinner party

A late-blooming burgundy hollyhock sways
across the kitchen window in a light breeze
as I draw a tumbler of well-water at the sink.
We're face to face, as in St. Paul's Epistles
or the later novels of Henry James.

The cold rains of autumn have begun.
Driving to Hanover I must have seen
a thousand frogs in the headlights
crossing the gleaming road. Like sheep urged
by a crouching dog they converged
and flowed. They do it every fall.
I couldn't help hitting some.

At dinner I laughed with the rest,
but in truth I prefer the sound
of pages turning, and coals shifting
abruptly in the stove. I left before ten
pleading a long drive home.

The smell of woodsmoke hung
over small villages along the way.

I passed the huge cold gray stone
buildings left by the chaste Shakers.
Any window will still open with one finger.
Hands to work, and hearts to God . . . .

Why do people give dinner parties? Why did I
say I'd come? I suppose no one there was entirely
at ease. Again the flower leans this way:
you know it's impolite to stare. I'll put
out the light . . . . And there's an end to it.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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Summer in the suburbs: 6:00 A.M.

From the shadowy upstairs bedroom
of my mother-in-law's house in Hamden
I hear the neighbors' children waking.

"Ahhhhhh," says the infant, not
unhappily. "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!,"
replies the toddler to his mother,
who must have forbidden something.
It is hot already at this hour
and the houses are wholly open.
If she is cross with the child
anyone with ears will hear.

The slap of sprinkler water
hitting the sidewalk and street,
and the husband's deliberate footfalls
receding down the drive . . .

His Japanese sedan matches the house.
It isn't quite beige
and it isn't quite brown.
Yesterday he washed the car, his arm
thrust deep into something that looked
like a sheepskin oven mitt.

His wife had put the babies
in the shallow plastic wading
pool, and she took snapshots, trying
repeatedly to get both boys to look.
The older one's wail rose
and matched the pitch of the cicada
in a nearby tree. Why

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is the sound of a spoon on a plate
next door a thing so desolate?
I think of the woman pouring a glass of juice
for the three-year-old, and watching him
spill it, knowing he *must* spill it,
seeing the ineluctable downward course
of the orange-pink liquid, the puddle
swell on the kitchen
floor beside the child's shoe.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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Letter to Alice

Twilight. A few bats loop out of the barn,
dip and veer, feeding on flies and midges
in humid air. Before the storm
I top-dressed the perennials with manure,
ashes from the stove, and bonemeal.
The rain soaking through the black
and white makes a mad, elemental tea.

I bought the bonemeal up in New London,
where the streets are crowded for the summer
with stately Episcopalians, and I've noticed
that it hardly smells.

We made less than usual on the Church Fair Supper,
held this year in the Blazing Star Grange
because of rain. Down in the valley
we're land-rich but cash-poor, shorter,
stouter, and lower-church.

By now the blackflies are biting more out of habit
than desire, and graduation night is over.
I've picked up all the beercans
from the pond road to the bridge.

The fully-open Peonies seem overcome by rain
and carnality. I should stake them: white
doubles with a raspberry fleck
at the heart, blooming without restraint
in the moist summer night. I planted them
just last fall, and this is a good showing
for their first year. More flowers, more art.
Write!

—Jane Kenyon

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An explanation of the dolby system

What it does, we have done for years in our own
ears and heads, encoding and decoding,
undoing performances, restoring them to their notes
from which we perform, on which we work our own
will, attending as we please, or ignoring
whatever we will, whatever is displeasing,
surface noises, for instance, the hiss we'd hiss
if we supposed these mere machines could hear
or react to our reactions. They boost here
and then diminish there, to return to a state
better than real, if not truer than true.
What possibilities are there for engineers
to tantalize us with, what high-tech tricks?
Dolby meals? Dolby sex? What Dolby
days and nights can we spend, lolling on some
Dolby beach? Thus, must the dead dream
their lives' perfections, parodies, and yearn,
in a heaven where the slag-heaps are pure gold,
for incidental grit, for imperfections.

—David R. Slavitt

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Concentration

Look at that goldenrod! Blue-green when I patrolled
a week ago, this week it nods in gold,
bright gold, and no one noticed it go by.

My old dog twists around to gnaw her thigh
and nab a flick of fleas. Too late. Pursued
by what cannot be grasped, our thought will find
no path to light except through interludes
of darkness. Where's the center of the mind?

Think of my dark-haired architect, upstairs,
whose buildings, stretched to measure for her clients,
somehow disarm all structural defiance
by taking place in shapes entirely hers.
When vision grasps a volume to enclose
within a granite skin, its eyes expose
a set of shapes (in fact as in illusion)
by mixing space with time. Doors, by exclusion,
admit events. The windows' glassy face,
abstracting light from heat, defines a space.

To saturate an emptiness in time
the access may be trivial as rhyme
that chalks faint boundaries for the unheard
and seals attention in a single word.
So Polyphemus' vision—as he groped his burred
and greasy sheep and willed his hands to bind
the form of Nobody, the man who gored him blind,
while his own animals were trotting past,
his favorite old ram the very last—
would harden in his skull, as was foretold,
helpless to reckon blue-and-green from gold.

—*Peter Davison*

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Art

In Correggio country

by Creighton Gilbert

The exhibition called "The Age of Correggio and the Carracci: Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries"—now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York—began its American tour at the National Gallery in Washington in December.[1] It is immense, with two hundred paintings, which are in many cases colossal. In Washington, it was installed not in the Gallery's East Wing, the building provided for temporary shows, nor on the ground floor of the original main building, where such shows can still occasionally be seen. Rather, most exceptionally, it took up twenty-three galleries of the main floor. Even in that much space, to be sure, any exhibition can get swallowed up in the museum's three-block-long structure. The beaux-arts building, with its very high ceilings, reflects, even a bit insistently, the status of the art museum as the successor-occupant of a royal palace, the Louvre in particular. This makes complete sense for the later part of this show, which is dominated not by the Carracci but by their successors, Guido Reni and Guercino.

These two painters, who surely define as well as any whatever we mean by "academic"—either approvingly or scornfully—got respectively an entire grand room and large parts of two others in Washington. The single most effective hanging, at the end of a long range of galleries, was of a Reni which in fact usually hangs in a key spot in the Louvre. This picture presents Reni's image, from Greek mythology, of the centaur Nessus swimming and carrying on his back the wife of Hercules, Dejanira, whom he has abducted. It came to America in its regular frame, itself two feet wide at some places. The picture—a typical mix of an erotic scene with classical references—is constructed on grandly orchestrated motions of limbs that swing in large loops and call for lots of elbow room. Its magnetic center is the smile of the centaur, which pulls in all the muscular forces around it; these forces are locked together by the twist of his neck as he looks up at his prize. With relatively little of the flouncing drapery that Reni and his peers often use to make their narrative points, the picture is an unusually sturdy statement of the operatic approach of this art.

In the Victorian period, as the exhibition catalogue reminds us, Reni was regarded as

1 "The Age of Correggio and the Carracci: Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" was on display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington from December 19, 1986 through February 16, 1987, and is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum through May 24. The exhibition has been organized by Professor Andrea Emiliani, director and regional superintendent of the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna, Professor Sydney Freedberg, chief curator of the National Gallery, and Sir John Pope-Hennessy, until recently consultative chairman of the department of European painting at the Metropolitan.

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one of the world's great artists;[2] George Eliot made gentle fun of the more naïve offshoots of this taste in *Middlemarch*. Such a ranking is rightly associated with the establishment status then enjoyed by salon painting. The present exhibition certainly owes its existence in part to the current approval of that Victorian art. Yet one doubts that the many people who now make Victorian art their special interest will tend much to visit this show; their frequent lack of a larger perspective, and Reni's lack of campy effects, are in the way.

The early part of the Washington installation was not so apt. It was at its best when we could ignore it, which it was often possible to do, since both the type of gallery and the hanging along the walls were so conventional as to be easily tuned out. But, especially at the start, some very small paintings by Correggio looked quite unhappy, unable to handle their great deserts of wall. Other, larger Correggios—designed to fit in small chapels, where they would fill their whole area aggressively—necessarily lost much when moved to the museum, even if it did provide a chance to see them in much improved lighting.

The fact that the exceptionally small Correggios make up a large part of his representation in the show, including two, not in the catalogue, from Washington's own collection, conveys a clear signal to experienced exhibition-goers. It tells us that it was not possible to get the right loans to present Correggio's high achievement in balance with the other artists presented. Just one of the pictures by Correggio here, the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* from the Uffizi in Florence (the second finest work by him in that museum), is a masterpiece with respect to paint application, inventive color gamut, tonal finesse, and modeling which is both firm and soft, in analogy with a living body. These technical splendors, all in the service of a sensuous statement, reveal a lot of what made Correggio one of the great models for certain generations of later artists. They also show that his quality is accessible only in the originals, never in color reproductions, and so help to explain why our century has not put him in any pantheon. Yet even this painting does not show at all how he placed these qualities at the service of inventive, complicated figure poses and action (not called for in this theme). Such imagery of human drama emerges in his frescoes, in his erotic canvases of other Greek myths, and more surprisingly in his big altarpieces; in them, he makes saints and shepherds press hungrily through twisting dances to salvation. Something of their flavor can be seen in one picture here, the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. It is the one Correggio in the show that is a drama of relationships and is not a juvenile work, but even in it the constraints of the ritual traditions of the subject matter are plain and strong. Correggio and his peers approached such topics in the way we know better in religious music, such as that of Bach; taking the text and the tradition as givens, the artists could decorate and interpret personally but they could not override. The extent to which that strategy was satisfactory for an artist so involved as Correggio was in the particularities of human flesh is problematic.

It was a fascinating notion to begin a chronological exhibition with Correggio and end it with Reni (and still later painters given secondary attention). On the negative side, the exhibition's size—with paintings by fifty largely unfamiliar artists—is surely too great for anyone not previously initiated, calling for much studentlike attention. It in fact resulted from this merger of two different shows, focusing respectively on the earlier and later halves of the history of painting in the same small area of Italy. For the organizers, putting the projects together had the advantage that, with less administrative energy, it was possible to arrive at something close to a blockbuster. The odd physical result in Washington was that the show seemed to be sliced in two. After looking at

2 The exhibition catalogue, edited by Keith Christiansen and Beverly Louise Brown, has been published by Cambridge University Press in association with the National Gallery (602 pages, $65).

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the first half and a bit more, the visitor found himself let out into the National Gallery's especially grand central corridor, a Mississippi of a traffic distributor, and then transferred to the other side. Anyone who was giving the show more than minimal time would naturally take the opportunity for a lunch break or the like. The experience was like the pilgrimages to the more epic works of Wagner or O'Neill, packaged with an interval of an hour or so in recognition that the faithful are only human. The corridor in Washington was used, however, for hanging a few altarpieces far above eye level, thus providing a bit of continuity across it. It was explained that these paintings were meant for churches, and thus for spaces somewhat like this. But the claim seemed a bit disingenuous, for other altarpieces were in the normal rooms, at more convenient height, and those in the corridor were simply the less good ones, provided with the less good light of a space not meant for seeing paintings at all.

There are also serious merits in being made to think about Correggio and the later artists of his region in a bracketed way. Like Reni, Correggio has been a hero for certain later eras. In the eighteenth century he was widely regarded as the second greatest painter who had ever lived, second only to Raphael. To us, it seems incredible that Leonardo or Michelangelo or maybe Titian might not have occupied that status. (In that century, it was assumed that the greatest ones were all Italians of the Renaissance; the issue did not even arise.) An elegant example of Correggio's position is the exclamation of the admirable Algarotti, an eighteenth-century critic who is one of the people made vivid in Francis Haskell's *Patrons and Painters*; looking at one of the altarpieces, he responded: "May the divine spirit of Raphael forgive me if, before this picture, I lose faith in him and say to Correggio secretly: 'you alone please me.'" We are to observe that Raphael is the peak of serious, even dignified, achievement, but that he could at times be pushed aside by the sensory immediacy of Correggio.

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It is provocative and satisfying to look at Correggio in company with the later painters of the Baroque century because he is very commonly tagged as "pre-Baroque," thus seeming to have more in common with them than any other Renaissance painter did. Strictly speaking, tags of this kind are nonsense. If such a term as Baroque really defines a time in history, or some events of such a time, it can no more have a "pre-" than there can be a "pre-airplane" period. We can say a balloon is a pre-airplane device, but it seems more misleading than helpful to our understanding of balloons. On the other hand, if Baroque is given the secondary, non-temporal meaning of something *similar to* the Baroque period, by analogy with the way we say things are "impressionistic," then "pre-" vanishes again.

Yet the tag does have a real reference, to qualities that separate Correggio from everyone in his own age, and which the Baroque loved. But such qualities are constants, available repeatedly in the history of art. A reasonable label for what is involved might be "theatricality," a term recently given status in art-historical talk by Michael Fried (though only, to be sure, as the negative foil for another term, "absorption," which had his approval). What is being referred to is an approach to paintings of groups of people (the primary theme of practically all Renaissance and Baroque masters) which does not reject reality but overstates it, and gives it a rhythmic pattern. An even better label, more precise and suggestive, might be "pantomimic," because of pantomime's silence, and because the dramatic form we know best in Marcel Marceau illustrates the quality so nicely. The well-schooled actor gains our acceptance and identification with his story not through a snapshot equivalent of events, which tends to be disorderly, but by redoubling, bearing down, systematizing.

Correggio's figures do this in extraordinarily complicated ways. A particular aspect of his imagery that shows the process especially well is his contour line, especially in mobile figures with centrifugal limbs and clothing. Their silhouettes have fantastic meanderings, as if they were disoriented octopuses; in comparison with their constant shifting, Pollock's linear systems look elementary and repetitious. The vibrating of the organism in Correggio is in high tension with the decorative luxury of the painted surface; De Kooning's linear embroideries on the theme of the figure are closer. Some of this agitation, certainly, relates to the artist's drive to be original, to top the admired success of models like Leonardo, whose vitality by comparison seems to be so plain by comparison, and to claim a non-theatrical reality. The resulting artificial flavor is one that Correggio also shares with his Baroque successors and not with his peers; he alone in his time abandoned the rule that art should conceal art.

To be sure, these explorations are not fully in evidence in his work in this exhibition. This is all the more a pity since I suspect we are ripe for coming to terms with this great artist more directly than has been possible for generations. For such a coming-to-terms it is still necessary to seek him in Parma, or in certain great works in Vienna and a few other museums.

What this exhibition gives us instead is a wonderful presentation of Parmigianino, the other great artist of Correggio's town of Parma. Perhaps the most superb wall in it, in Washington, was one showing three of his works, the *Conversion of Paul* from Vienna between two paintings from Naples: the locations reflect the avid collecting of his work by rulers in the age of absolutism. The *Conversion* is an ideal instance of the triumph of artificiality in narrative, the kind of mannerism that again seeks to top its models but not to deny them, the model in this case being Correggio's equally artificial but less extreme people. Sydney Freedberg, one of the chief organizers of the "Age of Correggio" exhibition, is certainly entitled to feel vindication here, since the *Conversion* was not even recognized as Parmigianino's work until he so presented it in his Ph.D thesis of 1940. It had been in the storerooms of

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the Vienna Museum for hundreds of years among the uninteresting pictures, and when it was brought out in the early twentieth century it was misidentified as the work of a lesser artist, a talented but less outstanding follower of Parmigianino's approach.

Next to the *Conversion* is the *Antea,* a portrait whose fascination is the artificial, scholarly one that it does not have the extreme look which we assume a mannerist like Parmigianino will show. Its bow is to the simpler idealism which he saw in Raphael. *Antea* has rightly become one of the great draws of the exhibition. Ironically, a taste that loves mannerism much more than Raphael has found special validity in a work where elegance does not require distortion and pressure.

The Baroque artists of the region from the Carracci onward have also been the subjects of revivals in recent times. Since the late 1940s, it has been forcefully argued that we should not bad-mouth them for being academic, as they certainly were. This was one of the pioneering phases of postmodernism. It has been said that this exhibition sets the full seal on their rehabilitation. But one may wonder whether that is really so. The rehabilitation, in any case, has hardly broken out of the limited sphere of specialists—of curators looking for possible acquisitions, of dealers supplying them, of professors finding thesis topics. The Carraccian glorification of the heroic, cool nude led me some years ago to ask Philip Pearlstein whether he admired this work, but it turned out he had not found it interesting. (It was the Pompeiian frescoes of the Villa of the Mysteries that drew him, among works of that general tendency, in that general direction.)

Much of the current action involving the academic Baroque seems a haunting repetition of a previous pattern that led people to pay the same kind of attention to some of the dimmer painters of the Renaissance, masters of rows of Madonnas, after Berenson and others had pointed out their existence. These painters, too, filled up museums and bookshelves but not much of our visual imagination. In the "Age of Correggio" show, the choice of emphasis among these Baroque figures itself seems arguable. The big play for Reni and Guercino reflects their great success in their own time, with the blessing of similarly academic contemporary writers. Relatively slight weight goes to their rivals who might perhaps have more bite for us today, more potential life for our eyes. I have in mind Tiarini, with his overweighted passion in eccentric melodramas, a driven Gounod to set beside Reni's calculating Meyerbeer. Most of all I would point to Lanfranco, whose brownish surfaces of people and hard dark grays in their environments evidently bow to the requirement of smooth balance yet pull into view a vast airiness and floating movement that the athletic ballets of Reni had not considered. There are places for upsets in the exhibition, which as always is its justification.

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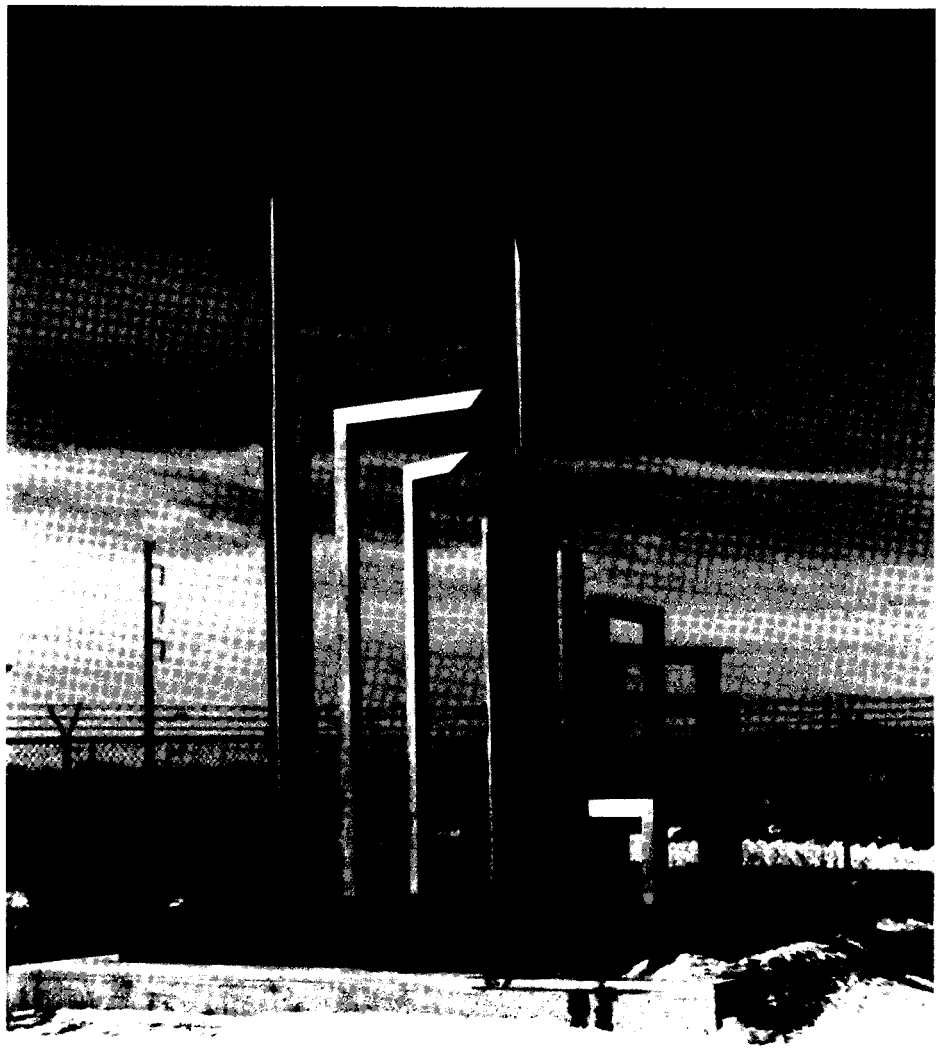

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Was Minimalist art a political movement?

by Eric Gibson

Only yesterday, it seems, one could safely consider Minimalism to be art. Once the initial shock and irritation had passed, the insolent muteness of Donald Judd's boxes, Frank Stella's pinstripe paintings, and similar works of the Sixties registered as evidence of a dogged kind of artistic integrity. No rhetoric, no sensuousness, no recourse to "exhausted" conventions such as compositional hierarchies—just the facts. And the facts were invariably aesthetic in nature. Now, however, we learn that we've been wrong all along. Minimalism wasn't mute; we were just deaf to its voice, a voice sharply political in character and raised in criticism of bourgeois society, the art gallery, and the museum.

Such at least was the reading we were asked to accept at a symposium held at the School of Visual Arts last February 26 entitled "The Crux of Minimalism: Style or Politics?" Although one might wonder, Why Minimalism now?, the question didn't seem to bother the many people who showed up for the event. The cramped, dark auditorium was filled to overflowing, and not just with students. In the audience were art-world personages ranging from dealers Jay Gorney of the East Village and Sidney Janis *fils* to the art historian Irving Sandler, who is currently preparing a study of Sixties art as part of his history of the New York School.

Still, for some of us the question persisted: Why the sudden interest in this movement? Had something long overlooked finally been discovered? Well, not exactly. The catalyst was apparently the recent "Neo-Geo" boomlet—that is, the return to a Sixties-type geometric abstraction in the work of such artists as Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, and Sherrie Levine. It is the conventional wisdom that these artists are not just picking up where Frank Stella left off, but using abstraction to explore other issues: meaning in art, or the lack of it, the deadening effects of received imagery in a "consumer society," etc.

On one level, then, the subject of the evening was the similarities and differences of Sixties Minimalism and its more radical epigone. "Radical," in fact, was the watchword that night. For as it turned out the panel's organizers seemed eager to replace the accepted definition of Sixties Minimalism with a new one. According to this revised version, Minimalism emerged not in reaction to Abstract Expressionism's intense subjectivity and transcendent aspirations but in response to the socio-political upheavals of the Sixties, in particular the antiwar movement, whose ends it supposedly served. In addition, or so we were told, Minimalism's true purpose was not to contribute to any ongoing aesthetic dialogue or to engender any sensuous response in the viewer but to serve as a critique of such cultural institutions of "late capitalism" as the art gallery and the museum.

It quickly became clear, then, that the symposium was not going to feature a dis-

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passionate reconsideration of an important art movement. Rather, it would involve the promotion of a radical agenda attacking bourgeois society and its institutions, with art enlisted in the cause. Over and above these topics, however, the more pressing issue became the management of the historical record, a subject which was to prove far more troublesome than any revisionist view of the period.

The organizer and moderator of the panel was Brian Wallis, an art historian, critic, and adjunct curator at the New Museum in SoHo. Wallis is a champion of the *engagé* position that sees only political value in works of art, and only self-serving conspiracies in the efforts of art galleries and museums. A typical sentence, selected almost at random from his essay in the catalogue to the New Museum's recent Hans Haacke retrospective (for which Wallis served as curator), reads: "How do the museum and the corporation employ the art exhibition as a promotional vehicle for advancing their interests and, specifically, for propping up existing class, racial and sexual hierarchies?" (It must irk Wallis enormously that the New Museum itself, which is supposedly untainted by such corrupt practices, must seek and accept funding from individuals and institutions associated with personal and corporate wealth.)

Joining him was Maurice Berger, also an historian and critic, who is currently on leave from the School of Visual Arts to serve as a visiting professor of art history at Hunter College. The other members of the panel were the choreographer Yvonne Rainer and sculptor Richard Artschwager, and two younger artist-photographers, James Welling and Haim Steinbach. These two pairs represented the Minimalist movement in its old and new incarnations, respectively. Of all the participants, Artschwager's presence was the hardest to explain. Certainly, his sculptures of chairs, tables, and the like are reductive and geometric. But their Formica surfaces, with patterns mimicking the textures and colors of the everyday objects he represents, give his work a wittily subversive Pop Art twist that takes them out of the Minimalist mainstream. Then why not invite Donald Judd instead? That was the point, of course. Judd represents the received definition of Minimalism—the Minimalism of *aesthetic* seriousness—that needs to be overturned. In Richard Artschwager, the organizers evidently felt they had an exemplary figure with whom to make their case for the *engagé* version of the movement, an assumption that had the effect of reducing Artschwager himself to a sort of lab specimen. Still, it remained to be seen whether this "test case" would prove out.

The symposium format was the usual: moderator's introduction, brief statements from each panelist, questions from the floor. Accordingly, with a slide of Gregory Battcock's standard anthology, *Minimal Art* (1968), projected above him, Brian Wallis led off, observing that Battcock's definition of Minimalism was seriously flawed. A deliberately selective reading of the historical record, Wallis said, had restricted our view to formalist or aesthetic issues. In fact, as Wallis wished "provisionally" to suggest that evening, Minimalism was a response to the socio-political conditions of the Sixties—the Vietnam war and the civil-rights movement on the one hand, and such trends as the increasing geometrization of, say, fashion design, on the other. "Has Minimalism lost its radical status," he asked, "through absorption into historical or market structures?" Clearly he believed the answer to be "yes," since he then asked whether "we [could] comprehend or reinstate the original, complex purposes of Minimalism and move beyond the exclusivity of our definition." Only this way, he said, could we understand contemporary Minimalism.

This sounds innocent enough, perhaps. Definitions always need revision. Moreover, the Sixties do offer the curious spectacle of a "cool" art produced in a tumultuous period. Why not look back to see if the old terms still hold? And yet, the working out of a new definition proved not so innocent after all. For in a twist that would become significant later in the evening, Wallis quietly estab-

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lished a crucial distinction: Minimalism could only be "radical" as an outgrowth of the war and related upheavals, not as an aesthetic phenomenon. Aesthetic phenomena are part of the "system," and thus not radical at all.

With Maurice Berger's presentation, the first of the six, the evening really got up to speed. Berger, too, used slides, one a contemporary *Artforum* cover featuring a Donald Judd box, the other a still photograph of a Robert Morris performance from the Sixties. Berger's point was the same as Wallis's, namely, that the received definition of Minimalism is too narrow; as the slides showed, Morris the hermetic Minimalist was also a performance artist. As proof of the hegemony of the narrow view, Berger cited an article by Phyllis Tuchman that appeared in the *Artforum* whose cover we were looking at. The Tuchman piece, Berger said, exemplified the way in which contemporary critics deliberately "distance" Minimalist art from social and political issues, in spite of the "archives" of available material, as yet unconsulted, which showed Minimalism to be radical. Such archives, Berger said, included the many small presses which had flourished during the Sixties, the testimony of certain "activist artists," and the "archives" of the artists themselves. Then, quoting Michel Foucault, Berger proceeded to characterize Tuchman's article and the outlook it represented as constituting "a repression of the social praxis . . . a fetishization of the object consistent with a history written for upper-class consumers of high art." In other words, the celebration of the individual work of art in Tuchman's writing, and in that of other critics, was undertaken to advance a view of art as a negotiable commodity, accessible only to the highest echelons of society.

Berger then singled out Robert Morris as the kind of "activist artist" he had in mind, a distinction Morris achieved by transforming his 1971 Tate Gallery retrospective into a "subversive" event. In his show, Morris exhibited no work, only a continuously run-

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ning slide show of the pieces which would otherwise have been displayed. Presumably, by transforming them into mere simulacra, he rendered them tantalizingly present, while shielding them from the "fetishization of the object." In place of anything more recent, Morris provided custom-built structures for the public to climb on and walk through. The lesson here was twofold: the structures were unconnected to his ongoing oeuvre and so intrinsically invulnerable to the museum's process of consecrating certain objects, as against others, by its process of selection; and the public interaction undercut the characteristic "noli me tangere" preciousness of the work of art, thus liberating the viewer from his role as passive consumer. Berger noted that the Tate had closed down the Morris show soon after it opened. Although it had given as its reason the need to protect the public from injury, Berger's tone made it clear that he believed the action was taken in order to reassert the museum's authority.

Perhaps it was the ritual quote from Foucault, with its reference to "upper-class consumers of high art," that did it, but at a certain point in Berger's presentation it became depressingly evident that the art of the period in question was to be held hostage to an interpretation every bit as "narrow" as the one the symposium was convened to debate. At the same time, an eerie feeling of unreality descended over the affair. One felt sealed off in a world removed from everyday experience, a world in which truth was to be determined only by the extent to which it served a pre-existent point of view.

The choreographer Yvonne Rainer spoke next—sort of. She opened by confessing only a marginal involvement with Sixties Minimalism; deduced from that that her invitation was based solely on her box-office appeal as "an ex-lover" of one of the principal figures of the period; protested being the only woman participant on a panel with five men; and announced that she had in fact prepared no statement and so instead planned to "titillate" the audience with "reminiscences." Thus began a rambling series of anecdotes, autobiographical fragments, and self-quotations that culminated in a reading—overlong and seemingly irrelevant—of a grotesque excerpt from J. D. Ballard's *Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A.* In this passage, located in a fictional present, the erotic stimulus of television violence is measured on a test audience that is being shown increasingly ferocious scenes of human degradation. Not quite what one expected to encounter at an evening devoted to the fine arts.

It was Richard Artschwager's turn next. What was he, a veteran of the Sixties, making of all this? Would he defend the old orthodoxies or turn his back on it all and join forces with the revisionists? At least on this occasion, Artschwager did not impress one as the most cogent public speaker. He talked for the most part hesitantly, disjointedly, and often on a highly abstract plane. Yet it was clear from certain remarks that he was unhappy with what was going on around him. "Are we into guilt by association?" he asked at one point. When he concluded, in a tone of outraged perplexity, "This cause-and-effect tangle has confused me so that I don't feel able to make a statement; I may have to return my fee," one got the first real glimpse of his opposition to the views propounded by Wallis and Berger. And who could blame him? He must have felt he was being made a fool of as the values of a lifetime were publicly dismissed as irrelevant and, somehow, wicked.

Little of note occurred in the remaining presentations. Brian Wallis took the floor again and offered a series of questions designed to guide audience and panel in their deliberations. (For example, How do the new Minimalist works "function as commodities or critiques of commodities"?) As it turned out, his questions went unaddressed, since they didn't bear on what by that time had emerged as the most urgent task of the evening; namely, finding a reliable definition of Sixties Minimalism that would accommodate the revisionist ideology.

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For much the same reason, neither James Welling's nor Haim Steinbach's statements had much effect. In a near monotone, Welling read an autobiographical essay tracing his evolution as creator of "anti-monumental" photographs. And in complete silence, Steinbach projected slides of interior-decorator catchphrases alongside pictures, culled from magazines, of assorted household furnishings upholstered in striped fabric. One supposes his point was to show how degraded and co-opted the aesthetic of Minimalism had become through commercialization.

Then it was question time. Picking up on an idea thrown out by a member of the audience but momentarily lost, Brian Wallis turned to Artschwager and in a by-the-way sort of tone tried to clarify the reason for his presence on the panel. Attempting to paint Artschwager as a "transgressive" artist in the mold of Robert Morris—that is, an artist concerned more than anything else with challenging the artistic status quo—Wallis observed that, while from his point of view Artschwager's work certainly bore superficial resemblances to a narrow kind of Minimalism, it also seemed involved with broader questions. What Wallis had in mind, he said, was the way "it investigates various kinds of institutional space" and appears to be "involved in dealing with the viewer in various ways." Artschwager's sculptures seem to ask that they be taken as everyday objects, but they aren't, a fact which supposedly discomfits the viewer, who doesn't know whether to look at them or sit on them. Wasn't this the case? Wallis wanted to know. Well, actually, no, Artschwager responded. Having worked in a furniture factory for thirty years, he wanted to create in his sculpture something which would distill that experience into a single object. In a chair, for example, he wanted to make a "platonic essence . . . the chair of all chairs." So it was autobiographical content, not "transgressive" polemics, that Artschwager was interested in.

At last one felt one had arrived at a moment of truth. Here was Wallis citing his eyewitness's work as an example of the sort

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of political intention he had in mind, while the artist himself denied having any such aim. Wallis's star witness, alas, was unable to corroborate his "story." For Artschwager, the determining factor in defining Minimalism—the "crux," one is tempted to call it—was neither style nor politics but affect, the innate emotional force of the individual work of art. His remarks had the effect of restoring a proper sense of historical priority to the evening, not to mention a feeling of renewed contact with reality. It was as though a door had swung open and a gust of fresh air had entered, clearing away the close, artificial atmosphere that had surrounded the event.

A short time later, Irving Sandler felt compelled to address the unchallenged twist in Wallis's opening remarks, where Wallis had tacitly suggested that Minimalism was only radical as politics, not as art. Robert Morris had just been cited again, by Maurice Berger, as an example of an artist responding to the Vietnam war through his art. (Yvonne Rainer had previously asked him how Minimalism could be thought of as part of the antiwar movement when it was all over by the time Vietnam became an issue.) Morris, Berger said, had withdrawn his Whitney Museum retrospective in 1970 to protest the bombing of Cambodia. The incident, in Berger's view, proved that Minimalism was only "transgressive" when it functioned politically.

At this point Sandler, who had been quietly taking notes all evening, but who now looked quite annoyed, spoke up. At the time Minimalism made its first appearance, Sandler said, "nothing looked uglier, less like art, more 'transgressive,'" and it was supposed to be that way. Its area of subversive operation, he implied, was aesthetic. It was art that was made to criticize art, not anything else. If that was the case, Wallis wanted to know, why wasn't it "transgressive" anymore?

Wallis's question came as a surprise. After all, it's the sort of thing one usually works out in one's college study of art history, yet here was an art historian and museum professional publicly asking, as it were, why audiences don't riot anymore at performances of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, or even notice Père Ubu's "Merdre." Sandler, speaking of Minimalism, offered the only possible answer: because over time, "its aesthetic qualities emerge," to which Wallis, undaunted, retorted, "You mean it transmutes itself?" He meant, one supposes, that it outgrows its bumptiousness and settles down to become part of the community. "Yes," Sandler answered, and of course he was right. Only someone with as determinedly sectarian a viewpoint as Wallis would think otherwise.

The juxtaposition of, on one side, Irving Sandler, and on the other, Brian Wallis and Maurice Berger, furnished the most telling of all the contrasts witnessed that evening. One could not help but see it as an opposition between the eyewitness, the art historian committed to a dispassionate study of the historical record, and ideologues too young to have played any role at all in the events under consideration yet determined to raid the "archive" in order to promote a particular agenda, an agenda which, in its political character, could only serve to obscure rather than clarify the art under review. For this reason, one was grateful for Sandler's presence, and of course for Artschwager's.

Time was soon called, and as one carefully negotiated one's way out of the auditorium, thinking back over the evening's proceedings, the name of a philosopher came to mind, not Foucault this time but Santayana. With numbing frequency one sees quoted his famous admonition that to be ignorant of history is to be doomed to repeat it. Stepping out into the crisp night air, one couldn't help wondering what he might have said about those who, knowing history full well, are eager to distort it.

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Dance

Rebel without a cause

by Eva Resnikova

When Eliot Feld left American Ballet Theatre in a huff in 1968, a year after choreographing his first ballet—the critically acclaimed *Harbinger*, to Prokofiev's Piano Concerto no. 5—the blame for the rift was generally ascribed to the ABT management, which was perceived as rigid, authoritarian, and unreceptive to young talent from within its ranks. Now, nearly two decades later, Feld has his own, hand-picked company, a custom-built theater, a school, and generous government, corporate, and private support. It would appear to be the ideal creative situation for an artist who does not feel his work should be "answerable to anybody for any reason at any time," as he put it in an interview in the spring of 1982, on the eve of the opening of the Joyce Theater. But in the five years since that much publicized event, Feld has, if anything, faded as an artistic presence on the New York dance scene. At a time when some of our most talented postmodern choreographers are exploring the formal possibilities offered by pointe work and other aspects of balletic virtuosity, Feld is continuing to limit his already constricted vocabulary in favor of "natural" movement—and, in the process, allowing his dancers' already tenuous classical technique to decline even further.

His company's two-week season at the Joyce in March did nothing to dispel this sad conclusion. The announced new work by Feld failed to materialize. An attempt at generating excitement was made by inviting the American expatriate modern-dance choreographer Carolyn Carlson to create a work for the company, but the result was an incoherent expressionistic-minimalist hodgepodge (it starts out like Martha Graham, then takes a turn for the worse into Robert Wilson territory). The only other company premiere was Balanchine's *Tarantella*, a virtuoso showpiece whose spirit of joie de vivre should arise naturally out of the dancers' technical mastery of its intricacies. But the performance served only as a sad benchmark by which to measure the company's by now completely deteriorated classical technique, for which the dancers tried vainly to compensate with pasted-on smiles and playing to the audience.

It is no surprise that the Feld Ballet cannot manage a professional-level account of this Balanchine pas de deux, given its repertory of the last few years. Feld, who began his career as the great white hope of American ballet, underwent a change of heart vis-à-vis the classical vocabulary, apparently while on the road between his last New York appearance in 1978 and his comeback four years later. Of course, there is no reason why Feld should not avail himself of other kinds of movements if he finds them more expressive than ballet. But when these turn out to be bouncing on your backside on a trampoline to minimalist flute music by Steve Reich, as in *Medium: Rare* (1985), or patting your head while rubbing your tummy to Bach partitas, a significant motif

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in *Play Bach* (1981), one wonders exactly what it is Feld is trying to express. Also seen this season were *Bent Planes* (1986), another setting of a Reichian minimalist score, which seems to draw its inspiration from aerobic exercise classes, and *The Jig Is Up* (1984), to Irish folk music, for which the dancers, hideously costumed in layered rags by Willa Kim, flap their hands, undulate their shoulders, and mug shamelessly.

An attempt at evoking a more serious mood is made in *Skara Brae* (1986), to traditional Irish, Scottish, and Breton music. The title, we are told in a program note, refers to a Neolithic settlement in the Orkney Islands: "Built of stone and inhabited by perhaps six families, Skara Brae was abandoned in haste approximately 5,000 years ago . . . . The reason for their departure remains a mystery." It is this "mystery" that Feld presumably wishes to explore, and there are intimations of tragedy in the dancers' dour miens. But when a large blonde girl lies on her stomach and slowly throws her head repeatedly back and forth from one hand to the other, all the while displaying an expression of the most exquisite pain, the effect becomes unintentionally comic.

Feld returns momentarily to turnout and pointe work in *Adieu* (1984), but it is his same hackneyed equation of ballet and romantic nineteenth-century music, in this case lieder by Hugo Wolf (sung and played live, but amplified—does Feld really think that a soprano and a grand piano cannot produce enough sound to fill a 474-seat theater?). There is a gimmick: the poetic-looking protagonist, whom we first encounter wrapped in a large black cape, is suddenly levitated, and his cape revealed to contain not only his girlfriend, in mauve chiffon, but the couple's doppelgängers, in Pierrot-style white silk pajamas. *Adieu* seems to be about Love and Death. Perhaps the actions illustrate the Goethe poems to which Wolf's lieder are set. But our German is shaky; and since the program doesn't even give the titles of the songs, we can't bone up at home.

In a lighter mood, *Play Bach* presents five perky pigtailed girls afflicted with a terminal case of the cutes who, dressed in unitards accessorized with elbow and knee pads, wrist sweatbands, and ankle warmers, perform to selections from two Bach partitas for keyboard (played live on a piano, but amplified for added punch). In addition to such gymnastic moves as bicycling in the air and somersaults, there are gestures derived from children's games: peekaboo, finger twiddling, the above-mentioned head patting and tummy rubbing, and, it would appear, "doctor" (five boys enter, and there follows much spreading of the upended girls' legs by their partners).

Feld's point in *Play Bach* is apparently to illustrate the playfulness that he hears in this music. But behind the fun and games there lurks a not-so-innocent undercurrent of hostility against the classical dance, with its demands of self-abnegation and deference to authority. A telling moment recurs in the Gigue of the Partita no. 1, when spurts of zany rapid-fire activity are topped off by an exaggeratedly mock-elegant balletic port de bras—a ploy that inevitably elicits laughter from the audience. At a stage in his career when he should himself be an authority, Eliot Feld is still the adolescent rebel thumbing his nose at the establishment.

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Letter from London

The profits of subsidy

by Matt Wolf

The best drama in London of late has been in the government-subsidized wings. Last June 29, London's *Sunday Times* announced on its front page, "Exit Nunn and Hall in cash row," promptly unleashing a torrent of debate. Trevor Nunn and Peter Hall—the artistic directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre respectively—were, the article alleged, being asked to step down amidst cries that they had used government monies to grease their own palms. *Amadeus*, said the paper, had made Hall a millionaire at the theater's expense, netting him over three million dollars as against the theater's $750,000. *Nicholas Nickleby* and, especially, *Les Misérables* were said to be doing the same for Nunn, who was profiting disproportionately to the theater that spawned those shows. In addition, the RSC as a whole was said to be suffering since its leader, Nunn, was abandoning ship whenever possible to direct glitzy, glossy musicals: *Cats, Starlight Express,* and, most recently, *Chess*, the last in a bail-out deal with the Shubert Organization, which co-produced last summer's failed American tour of *Nicholas Nickleby*. Both men—blared the press—had sullied the waters of subsidy in a country which this year will give £338 million ($541 million) from the national treasury to the arts, much of it through the (ostensibly) apolitical Arts Council. Owing to the primacy of the government's role in funding the arts, institutions which benefit from this huge subsidy are publicly accountable. Thus, no amount of directorial denials or threatened writs (both Hall and Nunn strenuously disputed the *Sunday Times*'s figures, only to have the paper reaffirm its reporting) could rectify the public-relations damage.

Nine months later the furor continues, as the paper's initial assertion—that Hall's and Nunn's resignations were imminent—proved true. In January, the RSC announced that Trevor Nunn was turning control over to Terry Hands, his co-artistic director since 1978. Nunn would stay on in an unsalaried advisory capacity, leaving him time to pursue outside projects which, to date, consist mainly of overseeing commercial transfers for *Les Misérables*. With a financial stake in each of over ten productions, however, his departure has only fanned the flames of criticism. If he has separated himself from the RSC, he still carries the RSC name with him—in the guise of a show that is likely to overtake *Cats* as the most successful musical ever.

Hall, by contrast, has found no such money-maker, although heaven knows he's tried. Two much-anticipated productions—Marvin Hamlisch's 1983 musical *Jean Seberg* and Peter Shaffer's 1985 play *Yonadab*—opened at the National Theatre under Hall's direction, their sights set on Broadway. Both works were properly derided, their future plans firmly scratched. As failures, they cost Hall little personally, whatever credibility gaps they created for the National. Had they

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been hits, Hall would have received his commercial fee (four percent, rising to five upon recoupment) in shows that owed their genesis to public subsidy. In the future, Hall will not have to worry about such conflicts. On January 12, Richard Eyre was announced as Hall's successor at the National. His tenure will begin in October, 1988, at which time Hall will launch his own production company to move shows freely between the West End and Broadway. "I don't foresee that our first production will be *John Gabriel Borkman*, starring Dustin Hoffman," chuckled Hall. But then what does his move portend? A resurgence of classics in the commercial theater, or a search for an Andrew Lloyd Webber-like figure on whose creative bandwagon Hall can hop? Whatever the choice, the potential financial gains are obvious. Freed from his duties at the National Theatre, Hall can compete in the big league, with its equally large risks and rewards. Succeed, and he shares in the entire pie. (Lose, on the other hand, and he has no three-theater complex to cushion his fall.)

So a chapter in the history of subsidized theater comes to a close, as the two men who did most in postwar Britain for the subsided cause take their leave for Miltonic (not to mention moneyed) "pastures new." Still, what story, exactly, does this tale tell, in its concern with crass topics like money that the artistically principled English theater was supposed to be above? Hall and Nunn have interpreted the *Sunday Times*'s contentious charges as a right-wing ploy to silence the voices of subsidy. How better to discredit the pair than to expose what happens to taxpayers' pounds when they land in their theaters? Fund *Amadeus* and upgrade Peter Hall's digs (from a penthouse flat in the Barbican to a house in Chelsea)! Support *Les Misérables* and keep Trevor Nunn on the Concorde! Hall and Nunn's stance was firm: they were victims of, in Nunn's words, a "scurrilously defamatory" Thatcherite scheme to squelch subsidy by embarrassing its proponents.

Although their reactions may have been extreme, the directors had a point, and both men must have let their minds wander enviously toward the America they know well, where such a debate would be inconceivable. In general, the arts in America pay big money for big-name talent; record stage salaries for star actors (Anthony Quinn, Elizabeth Taylor) and directors (Mike Nichols, Michael Bennett) are simply taken for granted—and reflected in the ticket prices. In the move from America's subsidized sector, too, we give artists their due: perform in a play off-Broadway for six weeks, and its move to Broadway is your financial reward. And if the show is too fragile to support your salary, you and the company soon find out—in the form of a creative deferrals or simple closure. These are the facts of the commercial theater, which Hall and Nunn understand, and operate easily within.

But one couldn't help feeling that at the National and the RSC something *had* changed, and not just the bank balances of their two directors. Suddenly, theater discussions had an unfamiliar ring: what was Peter Hall's take from *The Petition*, Brian Clark's two-character play which limped its way to the West End after thirty performances at the National last summer? How could Trevor Nunn possibly re-stage his Stratford production of Thomas Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West* for London, when everyone knew he was busy making skating ramps safer for *Starlight Express*? Several years back, the play itself would engender talk—Hall's way with the aspersions of Wilde, Nunn's command of the intimacy of Chekhov. Now one discussed profit points and percentages. Warned by Hall against becoming a "little America," London's subsidized venues were slipping into just that: sanctuaries for commercial speculation, run by men who seemed heedless of dipping into little America's big wallets wherever appropriate.

What irked the British press was the sense that its subsidized stars had broken the rules. In the collective sacrifice that is noncommercial theater, you give up the rewards of a show like *Cats* for the different rewards

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of work in the classics. Here, Hall and Nunn were perceived as wanting—and having—it both ways. Producer Cameron Mackintosh buys the rights to *Les Misérables*, and realizes he can economize on costs—and command an able creative team—by going in on a partnership with the RSC. The musical becomes a worldwide hit bearing the cachet of the company name, and Nunn finds himself at the helm (alongside his *Nickleby* collaborator John Caird) of an international money-maker that nonetheless enabled him (at first, anyway) to remain on the RSC premises. Similarly, Marvin Hamlisch asks Hall to direct his *Jean Seberg*; Hall says yes, but only at the National. Costs are lower on all counts, and Hall runs no risk of breaching his contract with his board to remain on the South Bank premises most of the year. If the production succeeds, Hamlisch can boast a National pedigree, which is convenient for the Anglophiles who proliferate on Broadway. If it fails, few Americans are the wiser, and life within the National's walls goes on.

Hall and Nunn say these are gambles they are entitled to take. An eight-and-one-half-hour adaptation of Dickens would be an absurd proposition if premiered cold on the West End or Broadway. And in the case of *Nicholas Nickleby*, they are right, as they were right with *Marat/Sade, Betrayal,* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, just a few subsidized productions that moved on to the commercial theater, with due rewards to their creators. About *Les Misérables* or *Jean Seberg* or, for that matter, Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, which transferred in December from the National to the West End, I'm less convinced. A hit, we are told, rebounds to the theater at a time when increasingly straitened funding demands aggressive "self-help." The financial success of *Les Misérables*, says Terry Hands, will enable the RSC to mount forty-seven productions in six theaters between London and Stratford in 1987-8.

And yet when the RSC begins doing Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate* expressly for a commercial British and American tour, one begins to worry. If Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn are accused of making Broadway-like fees off of their British bases, the theaters seem equally compromised, caught halfway. The point about British subsidy is that it allows for types of theater which Broadway and the West End do not allow. We don't go to the National to see Alan Ayckbourn and Neil Simon plays which, whatever their individual merits, are fair competition to test the commercial waters. We go for rarely glimpsed Shakespeare and Ibsen (right now, *King Lear* and *Rosmersholm*), ambitious new writing like Dusty Hughes's *Futurists*, and (in its world premiere) David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. At the RSC, we want more work like Howard Davies's recent production of *Troilus and Cressida*, which placed Shakespeare's most nihilistic drama in a Crimean setting of cracked window panes and dashed, egoistic dreams. Anyone wanting to see Shakespeare at the RSC in London during the fall of 1985 could not find it. In its place was the rock opera *Misérables,* en route for you-know-where with a certainty its producers tried half-heartedly to deny.

Suddenly, everyone wants to direct a Broadway smash: is this the unspoken true legacy of Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn? "Our most significant classical director [Nunn] has regenerated a musical for the '80s," says Adrian Noble, the RSC Associate Director who made his musical staging debut on *Kate*. But such regeneration seems double-edged. Traditionally, we valued the subsidized sector for work it was uniquely capable of doing, not for mirror-images of the go-for-the-gold Broadway mentality we are happy to leave behind. Motives, too, are now suspect. Peter Hall bashes the Broadway musical in his 1983 diaries, denouncing *A Chorus Line* as "bullshit"; next, he's at the National Theatre trumpeting its composer, Marvin Hamlisch, as "an extraordinary Broadway talent." Who's fooling whom? Trevor Nunn, for two decades, was the young genius of the classics, directing Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* at age twenty-six, the celebrated Judi Dench/Ian

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McKellan *Macbeth* ten years later. In 1981, the success of *Cats* changed his theatrical worth. Now Terry Hands calls Nunn "the most sensationally successful director of musicals we've ever had," and promptly put in his bid for Broadway booty in the form of the New York-bound musical *Poppy,* which never made the transatlantic journey. Nunn does still tackle specialist plays, including a haunting 1982-3 *All's Well That Ends Well,* that became the victim of a too-brief Broadway run. But even his non-musical work, like the current Thomas Heywood production, feels like a musical, with roisterous bar scenes that play like production numbers and a plucky heroine (Imelda Staunton's Bess Bridges) who proves almost as resilient as Gypsy Rose Lee. The production is, I suppose, fun, but at what price? Uniquely positioned to broaden our theater's range, Nunn has taken to directing in block, comic-book capitals. Can this be the director who re-read Helena and Bartram's *All's Well* pairing as the most discordantly fated of happy endings? That kind of subtlety scarcely now seems possible. Nunn can claim his right to earn as much money as he likes; that much is his due. But his choice of material now reflects audience demand, not the extraordinary individual caprice to which British theater is singularly well suited. "I don't myself want to be part of anything that leads the theater further towards being a minority activity," he comments. The remark almost makes one want to weep. *All's Well That Ends Well* lost money on Broadway. Does that mean it wasn't worthwhile, for the thousands who found its melancholia illuminating? Have we reached the point where that inimitable English expression for a crowded theater, "bums on seats," alone defines achievement? In the Sixties, ensconced in Vanbrugh and the Jacobeans, *Lear* and *Much Ado*, Nunn would—I imagine—have found justification in the *work.* Now, I'm not so sure.

The *Sunday Times* was, I think, wrong in the tone of its attack, which read like typically British sour-grapes invective directed toward any and all newly successful countrymen. But the article voiced a distinct truth, as echoed by Peter Hall in his initial response: "We do not arrange commercial exploitation; the world does." There, precisely, lies the rub. Gone are the days when subsidized theater was its own seductive milieu, free of commercial rigors and the imperative to please the audience. More attractive now is that well-heeled public whose money is overtly, fawningly wooed. What we lament about these men is their ready willingness to compromise a public trust—and the artistic standards that went with it—in the name of commercial success. Call it a fall from grace, or perhaps what now goes by the name of pragmatism. For Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn, the "world" is too much with them.

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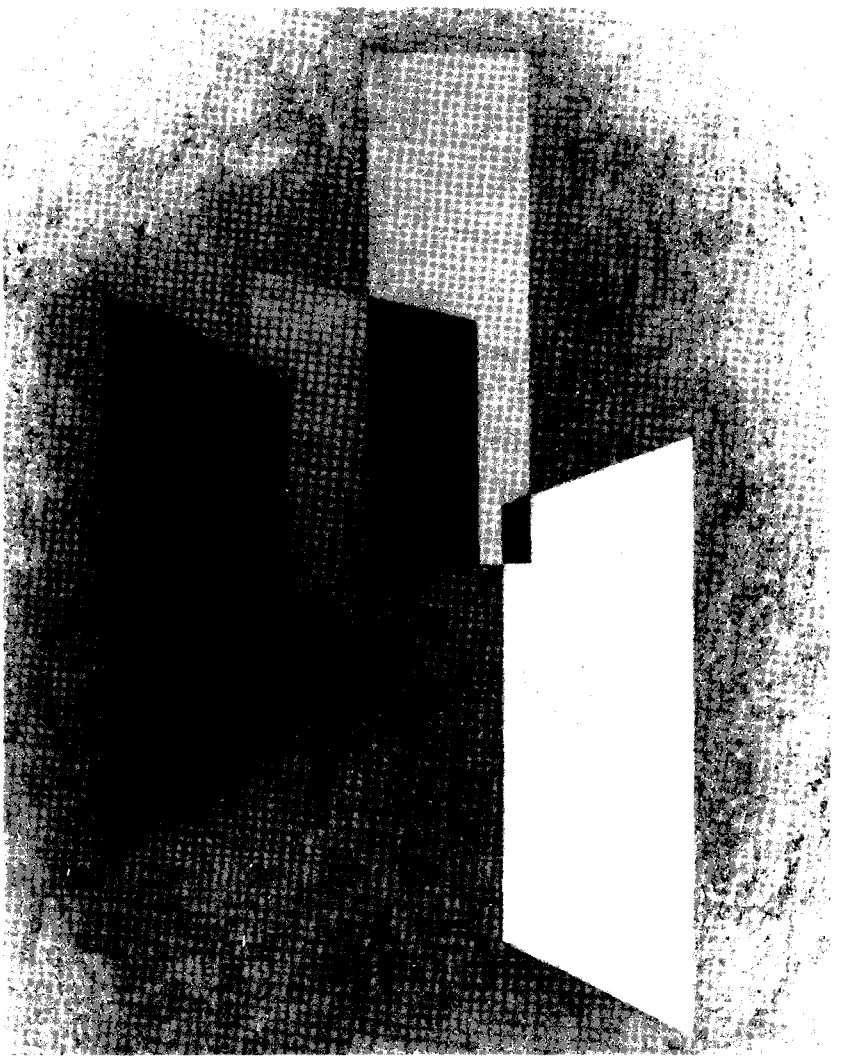
1892-1974



Trapezoids, painted in August 1936, oil with sand on canvas, 36 x 28¾ inches

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Books

Sartre resartus

by Roger Kimball

Jean-Paul Sartre was born to a solidly bourgeois family in Thiviers, France, in June 1905, a little over a year after his parents were married. His father, Jean-Baptiste, was an officer in the French navy and had been educated at the École Polytechnique; his mother, Anne-Marie Schweitzer (cousin of the great doctor and humanitarian, Albert), came from an old and well-to-do Alsatian family. Jean-Baptiste died in 1906, when Jean-Paul was fifteen months old, and Anne-Marie soon took her infant son to live with her father Charles Schweitzer, whom Sartre evokes in largely affectionate terms in *The Words,* the much-admired autobiography of his early years. Though Sartre claims to have "loathed" his childhood, he remembers his time in the Schweitzer household as years of coddled freedom and happiness when he was the clever center of everyone's world.

The center was displaced in 1917 when his mother married Joseph Mancy, a former schoolmate of the unfortunate Jean-Baptiste, and moved with him to La Rochelle. Sartre remembers his stepfather—when he bothers to recall him at all—with a mixture of contempt and bitterness; not that Mancy was cruel or worthy of contempt, but he had committed the unpardonable sins of disrupting Sartre's world and dividing his mother's attentions.

From the beginning, Sartre enjoyed the privileged education of his class. Early on, his grandfather Schweitzer encouraged his curiosity and interest in reading. Sartre was precocious, adept at music, acting, and languages, though indifferent at best in mathematics. At the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, he studied philosophy, taking first place in his *agrégation* in 1929. (A fellow philosophy student he met that year, Simone de Beauvoir, took a close second.) But, as Annie Cohen-Solal shows in her newly translated biography,[1] if Sartre was a brilliant student, he was hardly a model one. She remarks that at school Sartre was the "fearsome instigator of all the revues, all the jokes, all the scandals"—"scandals," it seems, that were hardly confined to the harmless expression of youthful high spirits. Once, for example, Sartre took it upon himself to send a letter to the police accusing a fellow student of having murdered a woman, the wife of a diplomat, whose body had recently been found; another of his "pranks" resulted in the principal of the school resigning. As Miss Cohen-Solal notes, "this image of a provoking, disrespectful, subversive Sartre recurs again and again, like a leitmotif, throughout his life."

Indeed, reading *Sartre,* one gathers that coming to terms with the philosopher turned out to be far more difficult than Miss Cohen-Solal had reckoned. The book opens at an auction in Paris in 1984 when several manuscripts by Sartre were up for sale. Miss Cohen-Solal confesses her displeasure at the

1 *Sartre: A Life,* by Annie Cohen-Solal; translated by Anna Cancogni; Pantheon, 555 pages, $25.

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spectacle, noting that "it's not pleasant to see our most cherished symbolic values brutally priced, exhibited, sold, and bundled off by anonymous gentlemen in gray suits." But as the biography unfolds, the author of those "most cherished symbolic values" emerges as a deeply troubling—not to say downright distasteful—character.

Having already written a well-received biography of Sartre's friend, the French Communist writer Paul Nizan, Miss Cohen-Solal would seem to be well placed for the task of telling the story of Sartre's life. She is thoroughly steeped in the ethos of post-World-War-II French intellectual culture—Sartre's culture—and anyone interested in the characters and passions that determined Sartre's life and times will consult her book with profit. She candidly recounts the highlights of Sartre's long career, outlining the circumstances and reception of his chief works and pausing to detail the various intrigues and political battles that absorbed so large a part of his life.

Considered as an intellectual biography, however, *Sartre* has its share of weaknesses. For one thing, it provides scant discussion of Sartre's explicitly philosophical work. Miss Cohen-Solal is surely right that *Being and Nothingness* is "a key to Sartre's entire life and works," but her biography does little to illuminate the main themes of that central text. Then, too, Miss Cohen-Solal's narrative gifts are not large. Her book displays a formidable amount of research and an intimate acquaintance with Sartre's oeuvre, especially his literary and political writings and his correspondence, but she has not succeeded in weaving this wealth of material into a coherent narrative. What we get is a series of more or less imperfectly related episodes, not a continuous story, and this makes it sometimes difficult to follow the chronology and changing *dramatis personae* of Sartre's life.

Miss Cohen-Solal also has a penchant for overwriting of the puffy, book-blurb variety, which tends to compromise one's faith in her critical judgment. About *The Words,* for example, which won Sartre the Nobel Prize in 1964, she proclaims that "it is a powerful, seductive book that seizes the reader with contrasting strategies, excites him, ravishes him, and then, finally, abandons him, traumatized, defenseless, in a state of shock." Well, *The Words* is certainly a good book; some consider it Sartre's single most accomplished work. But really: "ravishes," "abandons," "traumatized," "shock"! Is a litany fit for the fate of the Sabine women appropriate to describe Sartre's often rather lugubrious story of his first twelve years?

Furthermore, *Sartre* is marred by some unfortunate ideological tics. Miss Cohen-Solal can be quite critical of Sartre's political and personal follies, but throughout the book she indulges in what one might call reflex feminism and a species of anti-bourgeois animus akin to Sartre's own sentiments about the class that spawned him. Describing some remarks made at Jean-Baptiste and Anne-Marie's traditional wedding ceremony, for example, she pauses to assure us that "at a time when the division of roles between man and woman—his, the mind; hers, the heart—was still quite rigid, this speech did not shock the audience." And commenting on Sartre's teaching abilities, she notes that "thanks to him, his students acquired keen critical minds, a strong sense of responsibility, clear perceptions of class struggle and of racism, and an acceptance of otherness; they had demystified madness and other taboos, as well as marriage, private property, and the other symbols of bourgeois life. In short, they had truly confronted otherness to the detriment of all fictitious hierarchies, all useless conventions."

Given such clichés, which recur throughout the book, one is not surprised that Miss Cohen-Solal should wax ecstatic over Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's famous "open" relationship. "For several generations, this couple would become a model to emulate, a dream of lasting complicity, an extraordinary success since, apparently, it managed to reconcile the unreconcilable: the two partners remained free, equal, and honest with

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each other." One has to wonder, though, how happy—and, indeed, how honest—that relationship really was. Yes, Sartre told Beauvoir right off that his credo was "travel, polygamy, transparency." But what does "transparency" mean here? Is it more than an excuse for self-indulgence, a form of selfishness masquerading as ruthless honesty? And was Beauvoir pleased with her consort's "open unlimited harem"? Did she savor his letters graphically describing his sex life with other women? Was she really as free from jealousy and the bourgeois vice of "possessiveness" as she sometimes liked to pretend? Several passages in this book suggest otherwise.

But there is no doubt Miss Cohen-Solal regards Simone de Beauvoir as an ideal woman. In fact, in many ways, the real hero of these pages is not Jean-Paul Sartre but Simone de Beauvoir. Describing her as Sartre's "convinced yet autonomous disciple, a feminist" ("autonomous" and "feminist," especially when they occur together, are Miss Cohen-Solal's highest words of praise), she is at pains to portray Beauvoir as the patient mistress of every situation, generous but uncompromising, a stabilizing influence on her erratic and self-destructive partner.

Nor is there any doubt that Sartre needed such a steadying hand. *Sartre* is full of descriptions of its subject's excesses. In one typical passage, Miss Cohen-Solal tells us that

> Sartre's life had been more or less equally divided between, on the one hand, intense socializing—trips, rich meals, heavy drinking, drugs, and tobacco—and, on the other, the monastic austerity of a rigid work schedule. Work till noon at Rue Bonaparte. Twelve-thirty: one hour of appointments, scheduled by his secretary. One-thirty: back at Rue Bonaparte, with Beauvoir, Michelle, or some other woman . . . . Two hours over a heavy meal, washed down with a quart of red wine. Punctually, at three-thirty, he would stop in midsentence, push away the table, get up, and run back to his desk at Rue Bonaparte . . . . When he felt really sick, and the doctor prescribed rest, he would opt for a compromise: less tobacco and fewer drugs for a week . . . . His diet, over a period of twenty-four hours included two packs of cigarettes and several pipes stuffed with black tobacco, more than a quart of alcohol—wine, beer, vodka, whisky, and so on—two hundred milligrams of amphetamines, fifteen grams of aspirin, several grams of barbiturates, plus coffee, tea, rich meals.

Such a routine is of course a prescription for disaster, and one is surprised only that it wasn't until 1954 that Sartre suffered his first collapse, the result of acute arterial hypertension. A few years later, he reportedly almost killed himself by taking ever-increasing doses of the then-fashionable stimulant corydrane to help him finish the *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* And by the time that Sartre died in 1980, at the age of seventy-five, he had already been leading something of a posthumous existence for several years. Since childhood, writing had been Sartre's obsession, his raison d'être, his life. Yet after 1973 he was almost totally blind and could neither read nor write. In short order, a series of strokes and a battery of other ailments reduced him to the pathetic, devastated creature that Simone de Beauvoir describes in such excruciating detail in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre,* her memoir of the philosopher's last years.

In the spate of memoirs, interviews, and recollections about Sartre that have appeared since his death—of which Beauvoir's *Adieux* is only the best known—Sartre's friends are at pains to proclaim his generosity and kindness. There is no doubt that he could be both kind and generous, especially to the female members of what Miss Cohen-Solal calls his "family." But he was also capable of what can only be called wanton viciousness. As extraordinary as Sartre's circle of friends and acquaintances was, even more extraordinary is the catalogue of people with whom he quarreled and broke. From Raymond Aron and Alberto Giacometti to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus, Sartre seems to have delighted in the drama of breaking friendships. Perhaps the most

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notorious rift came in 1952 when Sartre ran an exceedingly hostile review of Camus's *The Rebel* in *Les Temps modernes*. Camus, understandably upset by the review, wrote his old friend a chilly letter that opened with the formal salutation: "Monsieur le Directeur." Instead of responding to Camus privately, Sartre published an open letter in the magazine, a letter that Miss Cohen-Solal is surely correct in describing as one of the "most cruel and violent texts he had ever written." "My dear Camus," Sartre began, "our friendship was not easy, but I will miss it. If you end it today, that doubtless means it had to end."

> Your combination of dreary conceit and vulnerability always discouraged people from telling you unvarnished truths . . . . Tell me, Camus, for what mysterious reasons may your works not be discussed without taking away humanity's reasons for living? . . . How *serious* you are, and yet, to use one of your old words, how frivolous! And suppose you are wrong? Suppose your book simply attested to your ignorance of philosophy? Suppose it consisted of hastily assembled and secondhand knowledge? . . . Are you so afraid of being challenged? . . . But I don't dare advise you to consult *Being and Nothingness*. Reading it would seem needlessly arduous to you: you detest the difficulties of thought.

None of this, however, prevented Sartre from penning a fulsome eulogy when Camus died in 1960: apparently, his friends remained enemies only so long as they were capable of being rivals.

From an early age, Sartre was convinced he would become a great writer, enjoying a "great writer's life, as it appears from books." And "as for the content of that life," Sartre wrote in his notebook in 1939,

> it can be easily imagined: there were solitude and despair, passions, great undertakings, a long period of painful obscurity (though I slyly shortened it in my dreams, in order not to be too old when it ended), and then glory,

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> with its retinue of admiration and love . . . . In a word, I'd have liked to be sure of becoming a great man later on, so as to be able to live my youth as a great man's youth . . . . [T]hough I couldn't be sure, I behaved as if I must become one—and was extremely conscious of being the young Sartre, in the same way that people speak of the young Berlioz or the young Goethe.

Yet despite his conviction of potential greatness, Sartre's success was not immediate. The early Thirties proved to be a fallow and frustrating period. Sartre's ambition was boundless, but his life was very definitely bounded; except for a year spent in Berlin in 1933 to study the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, he was confined to teaching in the provinces and to suffering the rejection of his literary efforts.

His literary career began to blossom only in 1938 when *Nausea*—which many consider his best and most original novel—and *The Wall* were published by the *Nouvelle Revue Française.* As Miss Cohen-Solal informs us, it was Sartre's publisher, the legendary Gaston Gallimard, who came up with the title *Nausea.* The book was published to great critical acclaim, and had an extraordinary influence, helping to inaugurate that dour literary-philosophical amalgam that came to be called "existentialism." The title "Nausea" is perfect, of course, for no other word sums up so graphically the hero Roquentin's generalized disgust at existence; and one cannot help wondering if the book's—and Sartre's—career would have been different had he published it under any of the titles he adopted when working on the manuscript: *Factum on Contingency, Essay: On the Loneliness of the Mind, Melancholia,* or finally—when asked for a more descriptive title—*The Extraordinary Adventures of Antoine Roquentin.* Somehow, none has the makings of a literary vogue.

Of course, Sartre's budding career was upset in September, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Sartre was mobilized and served as an army meteorologist in a succession of small towns near Strasbourg. His duties were far from arduous, however, and Sartre found that he had more time than ever for reading and writing.[2] His relative tranquility was interrupted briefly when the Germans overran the fabled Maginot Line in May, 1940. Sartre was captured in June as his company retreated in the face of the German onslaught and was a prisoner of war until the following spring. Miss Cohen-Solal titles her chapter dealing with Sartre's experience as a prisoner of war "A Lofty Captivity," and one needn't read far into the chapter to discover why. Sartre apparently spent most of his time reading and talking about philosophy—he first encountered Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time,* in prison camp, for example—and even began writing plays. No doubt there were austerities and humiliations to be borne in Stalag XII D. But Sartre seems to have regarded the very extremity of the situation as an inducement to authenticity and the exercise of freedom. Typical is his later comment that "in the Stalag I rediscovered a form of collective life I had not experienced since the Ecole Normale—in other words, I was happy." Indeed, Sartre's whole reaction to his months as a prisoner says a great deal about his notions of freedom, authenticity, and the merits of the "collective life" he dreamed of. About the latter, for example, he enthusiastically touts the lack of doors on the toilets because in the face of such a lack of privacy "the notion of an elite disappears."

Nevertheless, one cannot forbear noting that Sartre's "happiness" at the "collective life" in prison camp did not prevent him from feigning illness in order to get into the infirmary among the privileged, from lying about his occupation to get moved to the artists' barracks, or from escaping from the camp with false papers at the first opportunity in March, 1941. Yet it is part of the Sartrean hauteur that we should find him explaining to Beauvoir years later that he

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2 For a discussion of the voluminous notebooks Sartre kept at the beginning of the war, see my review of the *War Diaries* in *The New Criterion,* September 1985, pages 73-81.

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"did not really want to" leave the camp but felt he had to "just to prove a point."

What are we to make of such comments? What do they tell us about Sartre's character, about his understanding of freedom, of "collective life"? Miss Cohen-Solal suggests Sartre remembers his war experiences "with the tenderness of the fetishist." Perhaps so. Certainly, his recollections say something about the depth of his anti-bourgeois sentiments. And it is perfectly in keeping with his posture as the Disaffected Writer that when he returns to Paris he should write, disappointedly, that he had "rejoined bourgeois society, where I would have to learn to live once again 'at a respectful distance.' This sudden agoraphobia betrayed my vague feeling of regret for the collective life from which I had been forever severed." How much more attractive were those toilets without doors! Eventually, Sartre was able to transform his "vague feeling of regret" into open nostalgia, writing after the Liberation that "We were never as free as under the German Occupation" because the very fact of oppression made every "just thought" a "real conquest."

There is something not only bizarre but almost obscene about Sartre's haughty descriptions of his happy days as a prisoner of war. Yet they effectively epitomize his extreme view of freedom and authenticity as a kind of campaign by the individual against the strictures of society. As Iris Murdoch put it in her early, exceptionally lucid, book on the philosopher, for Sartre "the simple virtues of human intercourse become forms of insincerity. Only reflection and freedom are desired as ends and yet these turn out to be without content."

Despite—or perhaps because of—the disruption of the war, the early Forties were among Sartre's most productive years, in quality if not quantity. He published *Being and Nothingness* and *The Flies* in 1943, *No Exit* in 1944, started *Les Temps modernes* in 1945, delivered his famous lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" in 1946, and on and on. It was at this time that Sartre emerged

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as a world figure, becoming by the late Forties the prolific bellwether of intellectual fashion. The Forties also marked the beginning of Sartre's emergence as a radical political spokesman. As Miss Cohen-Solal observes, Sartre's political activity in the late Forties "shows us a Sartre and company intoxicated like all revolutionary leaders who read, in the increasing number of their supporters, the nearly sacred sanction of reality." Raymond Aron generously characterized Sartre's politics as a species of "revolutionary romanticism." But Sartre's hardened political confrères put it more bluntly when they speak of his "prattle." As one fellow radical remarked, "despite his lucidity, [Sartre] lived in a world that was totally isolated from reality . . . . He was very much involved in the play and movement of ideas, but not so much in events . . . . No, he was never terribly interested in the world."

Sartre is often described as a Communist. In fact, though, his politics were anything but systematic or coherent. Despite the friendly visits to Mao, to Khrushchev, to Castro, to Tito, to Ché Guevara, despite his declaration after returning from Russia in 1954 that "there is a total freedom of criticism in the USSR," despite his endless pamphleteering and proselytizing for Communist causes, Sartre was motivated primarily not by a commitment to the Party but by what Beauvoir proudly described as "anti-bourgeois anarchism." As Sartre himself assured his readers in the Fifties, "I swore to the bourgeoisie a hatred that would die only with me." Indeed, as Leszek Kolakowski observes in *Main Currents of Marxism,* Sartre oscillated

> between identification with the Communists and violent hostility towards them . . . . At every stage, however, he endeavored to preserve his own reputation as a "Leftist," and even to represent himself and his philosophy as the embodiment of "Leftism" *par excellence.* Consequently, even when attacking the Communists and reviled by them he made a point of directing far more vehement attacks against the forces of reaction, the bourgeoisie, or the United States Government . . . . His whole political activity was vitiated by fear of being in the typical situation of an intellectual condemning events that he has no power to influence; in short, his was that of a politician *manqué,* cherishing unfulfilled ambitions to be on the "inside."

By the Sixties, being "inside" politically meant proclaiming solidarity with the Third World, and it was then that Sartre became widely identified with "Third World" causes from Mao's China to Latin America. But here, too, it is important to recognize that his commitment to the causes he championed was largely a matter of posturing and rhetoric. He had no trouble writing a glowing preface for Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth,* a book that the historian Paul Johnson has called "the most influential of all terrorist handbooks," or blithely declaring "I believe in illegality" in *La Cause de peuple,* a self-described "revolutionary, proletarian, communist paper." In 1973, he even admitted his deep interest in the Baader-Meinhof Group: "a real revolutionary group," he exclaimed, though one that had "started a little too soon." But what did all Sartre's sympathy for the dispossessed amount to? As the French writer Pascal Bruckner observes in *The Tears of the White Man,* his brilliant study of Western attitudes toward the Third World, some of Sartre's political activism—most notably, his opposition to the French government during the Algerian conflict—demanded real courage; but for the most part, Sartre's "solidarity" with the Third World was hardly more than an impotent, and self-congratulatory, moralism. "Sartre's attitude toward the Third World was a strange mixture of masochism and indifference," Bruckner writes.

> Sartre declared that the West was rotten, but after this beginning, was concerned only with the West. He made peace with his conscience after paying a little tithe of guilt . . . . He wasted a great part of his talent in the esthetics of violence and Stalinism, and with regard to the Third World, ended up showing himself to

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be not only dogmatic, but inconsequential. The hard-liner was in reality a deserter. Let us remember that he came close to justification of the massacre of Israeli athletes by members of the PLO in 1972. He gave way before revolutionary regimes, just as he gave way to the Maoists, giving his name to ideas and actions that went against his innermost convictions. But, deep down, he did not take them seriously. This follower of the Third World did not accept it unless it fulfilled the familiar role of the victim from whom he had nothing to learn. This preacher of universal involvement, this maniacal devotee of petitions, had no real affection for anyone but members of his own tribe.

The real key to Sartre's character—the key that Miss Cohen-Solal occasionally glimpses but fails to make adequate use of—is his intellectualizing aestheticism, his tendency to dissolve reality in a play of abstract philosophical or political categories. It is in this sense, for example, that we must understand his admission that he tended to regard words as "the quintessence of things." "The truth is," Sartre wrote in a revealing passage from *The War Diaries,* "I treat my feelings as ideas: with an idea, one pushes it till it cracks—or finally becomes 'what it really was.'" And in fact, Sartre could be quite ruthless about exposing his own failings and selfish motives. But there is pretense even here, for as he noted in *The Words,* "I am always ready to criticize myself, provided I'm not forced to." The *game* of self-examination—for it was never more than a game—is merely part of the cynical, anti-bourgeois charade. Again, *The Words* offers sterling examples of the procedure:

> At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea*—quite sincerely, believe me—about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and exonerating my own. I *was* Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life . . . . Later, I gaily demonstrated that man is impossible; I was impossible myself and differed from the others only by the mandate to give expression to that impossibility, which was thereby transfigured and became my most personal possibility, the object of my mission, the springboard of my glory. I was a prisoner of that obvious contradiction, but I did not see it, I saw the world through it. Fake to the marrow of my bones and hoodwinked, I joyfully wrote about our unhappy state. Dogmatic though I was, I doubted everything except that I was the elect of doubt. I built with one hand what I destroyed with the other, and I regarded anxiety as the guarantee of my security; I was happy.

As Miss Cohen-Solal's biography makes clear, Sartre regarded such confessional exercises as a form of exoneration, as if cleverly analyzing one's failings somehow absolved one of their consequences. There is no doubt Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most gifted writers of his generation; Miss Cohen-Solal reminds us that he was also one of its greatest monsters.

Literary landscape

Iain Finlayson The Sixth Continent: A Literary History of Romney Marsh. Atheneum, 240 pages, $15.95

reviewed by Leon Edel

This book is about celebrity, geography, and propinquity. The mysterious title needs to be explained. The "sixth continent" is neither fabled Atlantis nor some unrecorded utopia of the mind. It's simply a local Romney Marsh joke, or conceit, probably invented by the Marsh's fable-maker, Ford Madox Ford, who offered it as an unsourced quotation in his book on Britain's Cinque Ports: "These be the five quarters of the world, Europe, Asia, Africa, America and the Romney Marsh." Kipling, who lived nearby, with his imperial touch, added "Australy" to the list, which explains Finlayson's particular total. Romney Marsh stretches in Kent from the English Channel eight miles inland and fourteen miles down the coast into East

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Sussex. Its flatness does make it seem Continental, for it covers a hundred square miles. A millennial creation out of earth heavings, solidified by siltings and other geological vagaries, the Marsh may be described as a sea-level mesa with plenty of rank green grass, splendid for sheep and other animals. The Sussex portion is famous for its pigs. The figures in the landscape of the Marsh are certain authors who lived among a population of retired civil servants, London commuters, sundry amateur watercolorists, and a profusion of golfers. Finlayson's subtitle is quite as mythic as his title, for he hasn't written a literary history of the Marsh. There are two denials in his preface: "This is not a book of literary criticism, but a domestic history of the Marsh . . . . There never was a Romney Marsh 'school' of literature, nor any Romney Marsh 'group.'"

If the writers who moved into the Romney Marsh along the Channel coast in 1898, some into Kent and others into East Sussex, were neither a "school" nor a "group," and if the book turns out to be neither a literary history nor a work of criticism, what sort of narrative is it? "Domestic history"? A few details have survived describing how the writers lived. Most of the time, like all writers, they simply wrote—Joseph Conrad and the young Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), a twenty-four-year-old quasi-bohemian with the propensities of a Munchausen who helped the Polish sea captain with his English and collaborated with him in a few stories; H. G. Wells, who was beginning to spin his space fiction as well as his tales of bourgeois lives; and twenty miles away, Henry James, he with the largest reputation, in his eighteenth-century Lamb House at Rye, dictating his novels to a typist. And (in 1900) a bird of passage, Stephen Crane, author of an American Civil War novel, bright and young, coughing away his days in consumption and shivering with his malaria acquired during his chasing of wars (a kind of predecessor of Hemingway). Crane lived with his common-law wife, Cora, eight miles from James in Brede Place, a ghostly Elizabethan manor house with earth closets and indefinable plumbing. The amusement of Finlayson's book is in the variety of his characters and the brief drama of Crane's passage, which brought the writers together in acts of compassion before he was rushed off to see a specialist in Germany and died there.

Finlayson, living himself in Romney Marsh, seems to have been haunted by these old ghosts and his book is charming, largely derived from the biographies of the various writers, a neat assemblage of the twice- and thrice-told tales, salted by the later inventions of Ford Madox Ford, who wrote four volumes of reminiscence (outside his books about Conrad) to give himself a place beside the large figures he had once known. He made himself into a "buddy" of Conrad, Wells, and James. Wells said of him in his autobiography that he possessed "a copious carelessness of reminiscence." He told tales about James's having lunched with Maupassant once in Paris and found a naked lady wearing a velvet mask at the table; or he said that James was snobbish about the way Flaubert, in an informal costume and in his slippers, received his guests. Spoil-fun biographers have pointed out that these were inventions, but legends once created have their own life. His hair plastered down and parted in the middle, with a pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth, Ford produced in the 1930s *Thus to Revisit, Return to Yesterday, It Was the Nightingale,* and *Portraits from Life.* A later generation of American writers—Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Robert Lowell—found him lovable and charming in his old age. I was taken to his flat in the rue de Vaugirard in Paris in 1929 and remember him leaning against his grand piano, large and short of breath (it was said he had been gassed during the first war). He told me nothing that corresponded to the information I had gathered from more credible sources. He talked like Conrad's Englishman who wanders around the Congo jungle with a book of navigation in his pocket.

One wonders whether Finlayson's small, pleasant book was intended in part as a reply

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to Nicholas Delbanco's equally small volume of five years ago telling the same stories and describing the same writers, from the same sources. Delbanco's very title, *Group Portrait,* shows he thought the writers spread across the geography of the Marsh were a group like Bloomsbury. But the Bloomsberries, who lived long in Gordon Square and whose geography is defined in the very name Bloomsbury, had a propinquity that went back to college days; even when they moved into West Sussex, they remained a group: theirs was a history of lifelong friendship. They were like the Lake poets or the Shelley circle or the New England writers in Concord. The Romney Marsh dwellers were in effect suburban acquaintances, however much they take on posthumous legendary wrappings. We know in general how they felt about one another. They all loved Crane, and mourned him. Conrad worshipped James; the American certainly had a tenderness for Conrad and helped him but was put off by his gloom and his morbidities. The history of Wells and James has been told many times. Wells sent James his books. James wrote thank-you letters telling him how they could be improved. With avuncular friendliness he called Wells "cheeky." Wells grew more defensive. He couldn't forget he was a plebeian while James seemed to the manor born. Ultimately he parodied James with high wit and considerable malice. That ended their friendship; this was long after the Romney Marsh period. As for Ford Madox Ford, he bored James and Wells; Conrad had many squabbles with him. James hid behind a tree if he saw him coming.

"No one can deny," Dylan Thomas once wrote, "that the most attractive figures in literature are always those round whom a world of lies and legends has been woven, those half-mythical artists whose real characters become cloaked forever under a veil of the bizarre." Dylan had no difficulty becoming a myth. And the abundance of Ford's inventions has inflated greatly the Romney period—although we must recognize that Conrad's migration from Poland and his sea adventures made him a mythic figure before he finally came ashore to be a writer; and James had himself worked hard at what he called his Americano-European legend.

One little scrap of their legend came to me from a nephew of Henry James who described how, visiting Lamb House, he went for a stroll with Conrad and his uncle. They didn't speak a word of English to one another. Their entire conversation was in French. The New Yorker and the Pole seem to have felt most comfortable in the language of one of their masters, Flaubert. Ford might have invented this anecdote. But it happens to be true.

Platonic relationships

Iris Murdoch Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues. Viking, 130 pages, $15.95

reviewed by James C. Holt

There are good reasons for Iris Murdoch to try her hand at writing philosophical dialogues. She is, after all, a retired Oxford philosophy tutor and the author of a dozen or so studies in ethics and aesthetics (as well as an early monograph on Sartre) that are highly regarded by the post-*Fach* crowd, who wish philosophy were less like science and more like poetry. And she has long appreciated the advantages of this classic form: in her first published novel, *Under the Net* (1954), she had the protagonist deflate the systematizing pretensions of a professional philosopher by writing a dialogue called "The Silencer" (those were the days of Wittgenstein, remember).

Among the genres available to philosophers, there is something uniquely forthright about the dialogue. It seems truly to mirror the process of philosophical discovery. Paul Valéry somewhere remarked that it takes two to invent anything: one to generate, one to select—and discard. According to this view, when a single person is doing the inventing, what is really going on is a sort of cognitive trafficking among homun-

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culi in the head—what the Stranger in the *Sophist* called "the inward dialogue." Socrates submits in the *Theaetetus* that the act of judgment occurs when the interior voices finally affirm the same thing.

So it is natural that philosophers should be drawn to the dialogue. For Murdoch, however, it has a special allure: as a Booker Prize-winning author of twenty-two novels and a few odd plays and poems, she is a literary figure of some prominence, and the dialogue is about as close to literature as philosophy gets. Formally it's a sort of degenerate play, one in which nothing happens. This might have put Murdoch off—she likes to pack her books with plenty of plot, including sex, violence, and weird goings-on. Yet she also puts stock in the depiction of character (indeed, she blames the decline of twentieth-century literature on lousy characterization), and the dialogue offers plenty of scope for that. The best evidence is the fact that, with the possible exception of Samuel Johnson, no historical figure is more vividly available to the contemporary imagination than Socrates—as anyone who has read the account of his last days contained in the *Apology, Crito,* and *Phaedo* can attest.

Sadly, philosophy's dramatic vein more or less gave out not long after Plato. Aristotle wrote some dialogues, and they were evidently admired for their literary qualities; but Western civilization was clumsy enough to mislay them, and now all we have are his lecture notes. Hume and Berkeley wrote a few popularizations of ideas from their daunting treatises, but the characters are one-dimensional. Malebranche made the dialogue the main vehicle of his philosophizing, and was even known as the French Plato. (How quickly we descend from philosophy's highest echelons!) Earlier in this century, Santayana wrote a rather mannered and soliloquizing set called *Dialogues in Limbo.* A few professors in our own day have begun composing dialogues as teaching aids to stimulate bored undergraduates, but this is not the place to address their literary merit.

So we should be glad that Murdoch has taken up the tradition, such as it is, by writing a pair of dialogues, on art and religion. Each is set in "Athens in the late fifth century B.C." Each features Socrates at age sixty, Plato at twenty, and three or four fictitious characters, including the eponymous Acastos (a "serious questing youth"). Alcibiades makes a late appearance in the dialogue on religion, swaggering in drunk to the delight of Socrates.

Murdoch labels these dialogues "Platonic." This seems innocent enough—but what is it supposed to signify? Evidently not that they are imitations; if that had been Murdoch's intention, she would not have made Plato himself a central character, for he appears nowhere as a participant in his own dialogues. Parody? Suspicion is aroused when Acastos opens the dialogue on religion by complaining, "My garland is full of fleas!" But despite the exaggeratedly campy, boys-in-the-band tone Murdoch favors, it's clear she has something serious in mind.

To appreciate what makes a dialogue Platonic in a deeper sense—and what might justify *Acastos*'s subtitle—one has to take a look at the origins of the form. Contrary to what the example of the *Symposium* might suggest, the philosophical dialogue did not arise from Bloomsbury-style repartee in the salons of Periclean Athens, but rather from a type of forensic contest called the eristic or dialectic, probably introduced by the sophist Protagoras. To begin the dialectic, one contestant would state a thesis—a proposed definition of a moral concept like piety, say. His opponent would then engage him in a cross-examination, or elenchus, consisting of a series of yes-no questions designed to maneuver the thesis-proposer into contradicting himself. If a contradiction is not elicited within the set time period, the thesis-proposer is the winner.

The dialectic was the standard form of philosophical reasoning in the Athens of Plato's youth—and an essentially destructive one, it should be noted. Socrates, it seems, was a singularly skilled dialectician (defined in the *Cratylus* as "one who knows how to

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ask questions"). Yet a verbatim transcript of his elenctic triumphs would have made somewhat dull reading. This is presumably why Plato recast them as literary dialogues, with informal settings, character development, badinage, and so forth. In doing so he managed to depict an engaging set of personal qualities Socrates no doubt actually possessed, ranging from the noble to the mischievous. Somewhere in the middle is the quality famously known as Socratic irony or ignorance—the pretense of knowing less than one's interlocutor while demolishing him dialectically. (What we call the "Socratic method" is just elenctic reasoning conjoined with Socratic irony.)

Socrates plays the dialectician all through Plato's early dialogues, acting as a sort of perverse midwife who delivers his patient's ideas of virtue, happiness, and knowledge stillborn. Nevertheless, a few positive themes emerge—the equation of virtue with knowledge, for instance. After the first book of the *Republic*, however, a noticeable change takes place. Plato has Socrates leave off confutation and turn instead to the exposition of the Theory of Forms—a peculiarly Platonic conceit, according to Aristotle. Socratic irony disappears, interlocutors are reduced to acquiescence, and the concerns of drama give way to impersonal dogma.

What makes the middle and late dialogues Platonic, then, is not the Socratic method—which is in fact absent—but rather the philosophical doctrines that get mapped out. And, one finds, the same goes for Murdoch's—insofar as they are Platonic at all.

In the first two-thirds or so of each *Acastos* dialogue, the lesser participants address themselves to the featured topic while Socrates moderates and Plato broods apart. (Wasn't Socrates the famous brooder?) The proposed accounts read like off-the-shelf versions of later currents in Western thought. On art we get the copy theory, the expression theory, the cognitive theory, and social realism; on religion we hear "precapitulations" of Feuerbach, Marx, Kierkegaard. Occasionally there is a bit of prospective

El Lissitzky, *Pelikan Ink*, 1924

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plagiarism: one character says, "we don't want to explain the world, we want to change it"; another knocks a table to prove the existence of the external world (preempting both Dr. Johnson and G. E. Moore); Socrates twice says "look and see," a Wittgenstein byword that also cropped up in Murdoch's *Under the Net*.

Disappointingly, no one gets skewered by a Socratic elenchus here. As Plato says when he finally storms in, "Socrates is just making you hold forth, he's not correcting you." The master sounds at times like a sensitive high-school teacher ("Think, my child, think, you *can* think")—we miss the puckish side. Plato's Socrates was put to death for corrupting Athenian youth with his dialectic; Murdoch's could only corrupt a youth the way a congressman corrupts a page.

The philosophy gets going in earnest when Plato joins the parley. You'd expect Murdoch to give him something Platonic to say—her two big themes over the years, the sovereignty and transcendence of good, certainly bear the philosopher's stamp—and so she does. Though the Plato of *Acastos* is nominally talking about art and religion, his real subject in both dialogues is *eros*, the impulse of desire or love. Without it, he says, man would be a "ghost"; with it, "he can be—either a demon or—Socrates." What obsesses Plato, with an intensity that makes him stammer, is the necessity that *eros* ascend to its highest and essential object, which he refers to simply as "the good."

Art worries Plato because it threatens to divert man from his spiritual pilgrimage toward the good. Bad art drags *eros* down to the domain of sensuality and violence. High art is even more dangerous: by giving us "the illusion of thinking great thoughts," it represents "the last exit" before wisdom and thus is "the biggest lie of all."

In the dialogue on religion, Plato allows that God is "just a figure of speech . . . . religion is above the gods . . . . religion is spiritual change, *absolute* spiritual change." Not surprisingly, the sort of change he is talking about is in the direction of virtue, which—like wisdom—is synonymous with the love and worship of this self-subsistent thing called the good. When the irreverent Alcibiades denies the sovereignty of good by claiming that it can only exist in harmony with evil—and then identifies religion with the recognition of this harmony—Plato rages, "That's a damned lie, the worst lie of all . . . ." (Note the equation: art = "biggest lie" = "worst lie" = the harmony of good and evil. Is Murdoch suggesting something deep here? If so, she might have taken the trouble to spell it out.)

In the dialogue on art, Plato insists that the struggle to see the good can only be won through the discipline of philosophy. In line with Murdoch's own predilections, however, he speaks more in moral than in intellectual terms. We are, he declares, trapped in a cave of solipsism formed by selfish desires and personal fantasy; the way out is "learning other people." Socrates cools things down a bit after Plato's effusions, pointing out that mixed beings such as ourselves may not be able to move forward without the catalyst of art, and stressing the practice of garden-variety virtue.

As should be obvious by now, the themes of *Acastos* are borrowed from the *Symposium*—where Diotima's account of the ascent of *eros* toward beauty itself (explicitly identified with the good) is revealed by Socrates—and from the *Republic*. Yet they are given a twist. For Plato, the penultimate object of *eros* is scientific and mathematical beauty. The good itself, though never sharply limned in Plato's dialogues, seems to have had for him much the same flavor: Aristotle reported that a public lecture Plato gave on the subject struck the audience as difficult and mathematical.

Ther version given by Murdoch's Plato is fuzzy and romantic. Beauty is a "Clue," falling in love is "a sort of *picture*." And goodness itself? "It's not abstract, it's all here . . . it's knowing the world . . . *this* world as it really is, in all its—details," including, he admits with some hesitation, "bits of hair and mud, and dirt, and fleas . . . ." (This is a misappropriation: although the young Soc-

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rates is forced in the *Parmenides* to concede that his theory might entail transcendent forms for these "undignified things," the point is a purely logical one.) If there really is an affinity between Plato's thought and Murdoch's, this sort of windy chat only trivializes it. The philosophically inclined would be better advised to try Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1971) and *The Fire and the Sun* (1977)—and then maybe return to *Acastos*.

If you are not out for edification, however, Murdoch's pair of dialogues are at least agreeable to read through, and they would not make bad theater pieces (the one on art has already been performed in England). The author may not have captured the soul of the young Plato—the only thing we know about him, that he planned on a political career, seems at odds with her portrait—but the character that bears his name has some charm in his own right. Socrates's perorations are pretty; they give the image, if not the substance, of deep thought (perhaps they are meant to illustrate Plato's criticism of art). There is even a bit of action when Plato rushes the stronger Alcibiades and gets his arm twisted. Still, you feel it would not have been a great tragedy if Murdoch-Plato had heeded Murdoch-Socrates's advice: "Don't write it all down!"

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Letters

Vladimir Nabokov

To the Editors:

In her article on Vladimir Nabokov ("Vladimir Nabokov: Ardor and Art," March, 1987), Fernanda Eberstadt does an excellent job sorting out his best work from his weakest work. She is well aware that in some respects Nabokov is the worst guide to his work, since he was inordinately fond of linguistic gimmicks. But, at his best, as in *Pale Fire,* which Eberstadt rightly says is his best novel, Nabokov uses his trickery to powerful expressive effect. The novel is very moving, unlike *Ada,* which is a self-indulgent bore. All too often Nabokov has been interpreted by critics who take Nabokov's Joycean games much too seriously. What Nabokov needed was a critic who could distinguish between mere trickery and tricks used to support a powerful and moving plot, as is the case with *Pale Fire.* Eberstadt's piece is simply the best introduction to this dazzling but uneven writer that I've ever read.

Stephen Miller
Reston, VA

To the Editors:

Fernanda Eberstadt's otherwise excellent essay on Vladimir Nabokov disappoints by its cursory treatment of the *Lectures on Literature* and the *Lectures on Russian Literature.* It is not enough to say that the *Lectures* "betray no critical aptitude save enthusiasm" and "thoroughness," nor is it correct to assert that "the combination of posturing and pedantry that characterizes Nabokov's scholarly criticism prevents one from taking him seriously as a critic." On the contrary, Nabokov as critic is as instructive as he is amusing.

Nabokov's approach to the classic works of literature offers an excellent lesson in the correct way to teach these much discussed, overexposed books. Nabokov debunks for a reason, and that is to rid his students and readers of preconceptions, given opinions, cliché responses, in short, the entire arsenal of established critical thought. His iconoclasm must have been hugely stimulating to a college audience made somnolent by the reverential tones of academe. His refusal to offer the timeworn appraisals of these writers serves as an impetus to examine them with a fresh critical vision. Nabokov detested anything that smacked of causes or group thinking, and his literary reactions are ferociously individual and idiosyncratic without forsaking sound critical principles. It requires far more literary acumen to demonstrate in what ways Dostoevsky's reputation may be overestimated than to follow critical orthodoxy and reiterate the usual words of praise and admiration. Additionally, Nabokov's occasional deflation of literary idols is accomplished with such biting humor and in a language as varied and elegant as any he ever wrote that it would be a mistake to forego the *Lectures.* One wonders why Miss Eberstadt, so attuned to Nabokov's humor in his other works, begrudges him a little wit and mockery in the *Lectures.* Is criticism too serious a business to permit occasional irreverence and play?

It is the *Lectures on Russian Literature,* in

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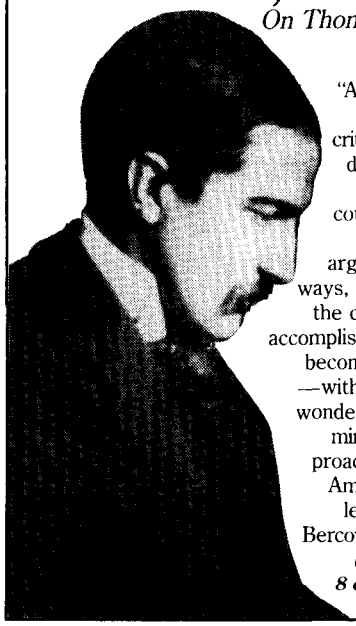
On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane



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particular, that prove Nabokov's excellence as a critic. Any lover of Russian literature must consider this volume an indispensable critical companion, offering as it does an assessment of these giant writers by a fellow craftsman and compatriot. There are insights in these *Lectures* that only a Russian writer of Nabokov's stature can provide. I find it illuminating, for example, to have Nabokov reject the standard English title of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and substitute instead the far more suggestive and revealing title of *Memoirs from a Mousehole.* Nabokov's essay on Gogol's *Dead Souls* is perhaps the most penetrating in the collection. His discussion of the Gogolian phenomenon of "peripheral" or "comparison-generated" characters is a stroke of critical and linguistic brilliance. "The peripheral characters of his novel," Nabokov writes, "are engendered by the subordinate clauses of its various metaphors, comparisons and lyrical outbursts. We are faced by the remarkable phenomenon of mere forms of speech directly giving rise to live creatures. This is perhaps the most typical example of how this happens. 'Even the weather had obligingly accommodated itself to the setting; the day was neither bright nor gloomy but of a kind of bluey-grey tint such as is found only upon the worn-out uniforms of garrison soldiers, for the rest a peaceful class of warriors except for their being somewhat inebriate on Sundays.'" Nabokov goes on to provide further examples of this "spontaneous generation" of characters who "never emerge from the wings."

One can ask little more of a critic than perceptions of this sort except perhaps that he unite thoroughness and enthusiasm in his approach to literature. In Miss Eberstadt's mouth these attributes sound trite and uninteresting. There is no question, however, that they represent the basic tenets of literary criticism, implying a complete mastery of the subject on the one hand and the essential ingredient of passion on the other. I might add that the word "thorough" hardly describes Nabokov's meticulous approach to these books. His essays are filled with sketches, maps, drawings of costumes, notes, and outlines. Furthermore, his painstaking analysis is proof of the great respect he has for these writers.

I have said nothing of the essays that serve as appendages to the *Lectures.* The best of these are

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"Good Readers and Good Writers" and "Philistines and Philistinism."

Nabokov's *Lectures,* while subordinate to his works of fiction, offer an arresting portrait of how this writer read and stand as important critical references for the works discussed. One reads them with delight and with the certain knowledge that they will be consulted whenever we undertake to reread these classic works of literature.

Marcela Breton
Austin, TX

Fernanda Eberstadt replies:

I thank Stephen Miller for his very generous words about my article. Marcela Breton is the kind of reader every critic dreams of, and I am grateful for her thoughtful examination of Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* and his *Lectures on Russian Literature.* Funny and interesting as her citations are, however, I am not persuaded of Nabokov's stature as a critic.

It is undeniable that Nabokov was an immensely lively and engaging teacher, and that "enthusiasm" and "thoroughness" are hardly small beer. Indeed, at the outset of my piece, in summing up Nabokov's chief strengths and failings, I gave pride of place to "his wholehearted devotion to literature." But I cannot agree with Marcela Breton that this devotion translated in Nabokov's case into any formulation or maintenance of "sound critical principles." On the contrary, Nabokov's overriding determination to be original and "iconoclastic" at all costs betrayed him into a frivolous perversity. Thus, Nabokov in his criticism habitually trashed in passing Balzac, Faulkner, Mann, Zola, Stendhal, George Eliot, Vergil, Corneille, and most famously, Dostoevsky, substituting offhand abuse—"trivial," "overrated," "talentless," "paltry"—for any critical analysis or even explanation of his judgments.

Consequently, the reader is left with little sense of why—save whim—Nabokov likes what he likes and hates what he hates. This desire to be shocking also led him occasionally to befoul even those books he most admired; viz. his habitual characterization of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* as a disguised glorification of homosexuality.

Finally, unlike Marcela Breton, I believe that it requires greater critical acumen to reveal new aspects of a major writer's genius, or even profoundly to restate the nature of his accomplishment, than to throw eggs at literary idols. Unfortunately, for most students and readers today, "the classic works of literature" are not "overexposed," but rather underread and underloved.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of Donald Justice's new collection of poems, *Sunset Maker* (Atheneum, $16.95). Several poems included in this volume first appeared in *The New Criterion.*

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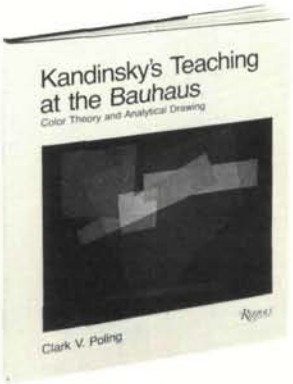

KANDINSKY'S TEACHING AT THE BAUHAUS:
Color and Theory and Analytical Drawing

Clark V. Poling. The first book devoted entirely to Kandinsky's role as a leading teacher and theoretician at the Bauhaus from 1922 to 1933. "His semimystical teachings influenced a generation of spiritually searching painters. Almost 200 color exercises, analytical drawings, paintings and formal studies made by Kandinsky's Bauhaus pupils are reproduced in this scholarly study, along with illustrations of his own paintings"—*Publishers Weekly.* 160 pages. 178 illus. 0780-0. $40

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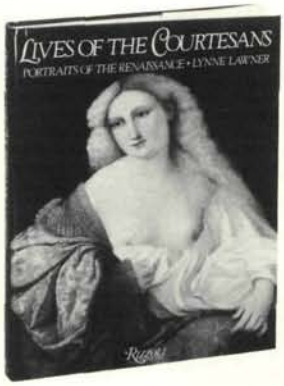

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Recent Paintings

Entries - Painted Interpretations from Photo Images

In collaboration with Norman McGrath

May 2 - 27, 1987

Superman on Lois Lane, 1986, oil on canvas 31" x 63"

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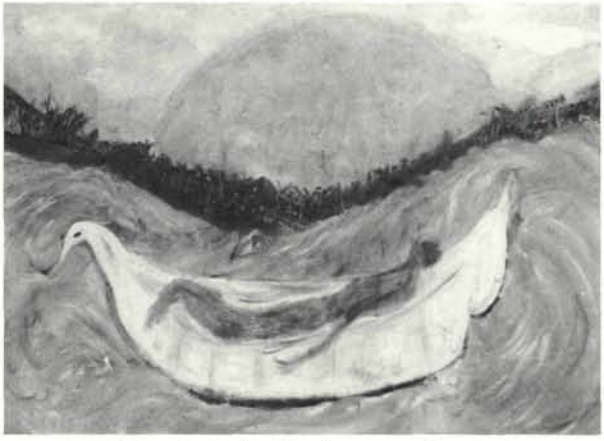

In the Slop of His Cradle, 1985, oil on canvas, 36 x 50 inches

Ingber Gallery 415 W. Broadway, New York, 10012 212-226-2221

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Richard Piccolo

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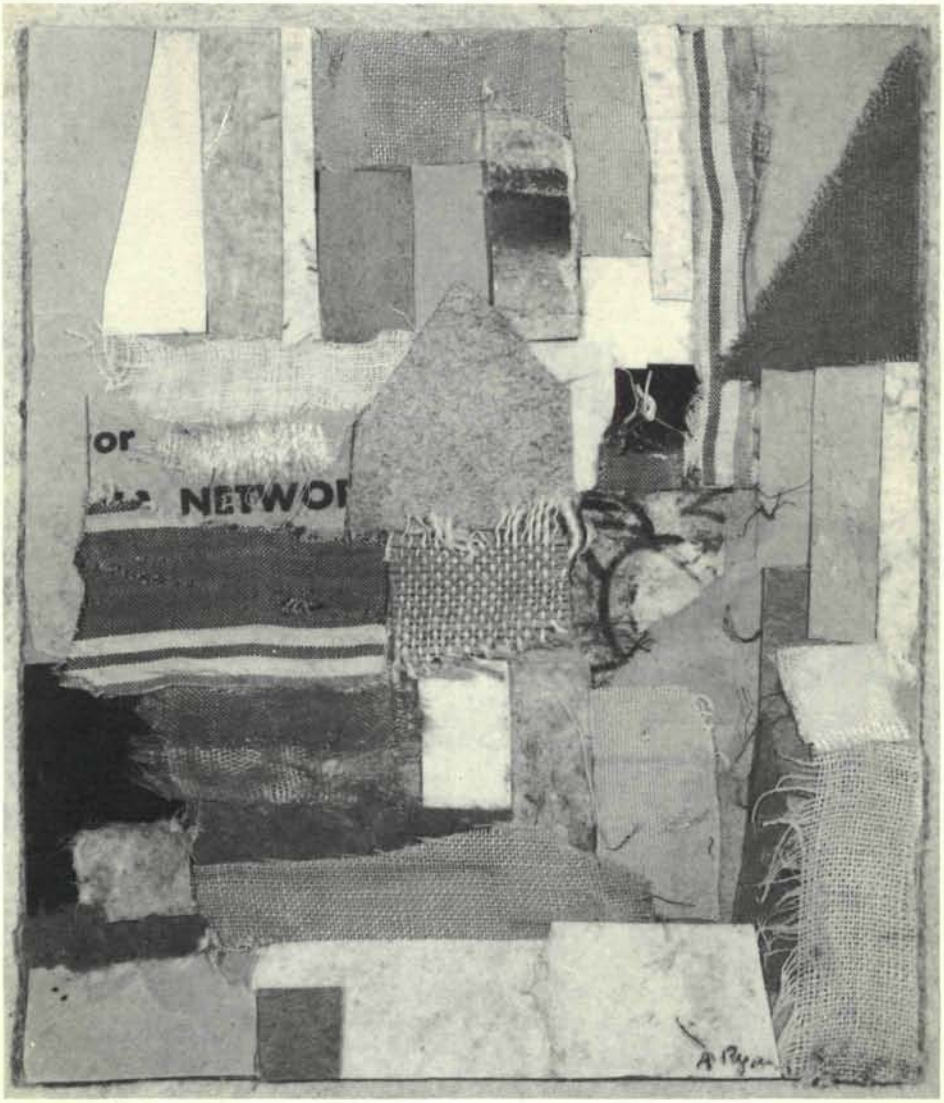

Anne Ryan. Untitled, No. 140, c. 1948-54. Collage, 6 × 5 inches

MAY 5–MAY 30

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